



Performing Negro Folk Culture, Performing America: Hall Johnson's Choral and Dramatic Works (1925-1939)

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**Performing Negro Folk Culture, Performing America:
Hall Johnson's Choral and Dramatic Works (1925-1939)**

A dissertation presented by

Micah Wittmer

To

The Department of Music
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Music

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the portrayal of Negro folk culture in concert performances of the Hall Johnson Choir and in Hall Johnson's popular music drama, *Run, Little Chillun*. I contribute to existing scholarship on Negro spirituals by tracing the performances of these songs by the original Fisk Jubilee singers in 1867 to the Hall Johnson Choir's performances in the 1920s-1930s, with a specific focus on the portrayal of Negro folk culture. By doing so, I show how the meaning and importance of performing Negro folk culture changed over time during this period. My dissertation also draws on Hall Johnson's lectures, radio broadcasts, and published essays on Negro folk culture. By tracing the performance of the Negro spirituals to those of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers during the Reconstruction period, it becomes clear that without the path-breaking work of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, there would be no Hall Johnson Choir.

Hall Johnson was devoted to composing works about African Americans that preserved and accurately portrayed Negro folk culture because he believed that Negro folk culture was an essential part of American cultural identity. I posit that *Run, Little Chillun* employs the ideals of the New Negro Renaissance, strategically capitalizing on what many white American cultural critics believed to be primitive—and therefore genuine—black culture while promoting a unique version of black empowerment through the speech of an Oxford Educated black male character who espoused an Afrofuturistic theology. With an interdisciplinary approach, I draw on musicology, African American studies, and sociology to place Hall Johnson's writings on Negro spirituals within the context of the greater discussion of Negro spirituals during the 1920s-1940s. My primary

methodology is historical and includes archival research, musical analysis, and reception history. The writings of black intellectuals and leaders of the New Negro Renaissance such as W.E.B Du Bois, Alain Locke, William Work, and John Rosamond Johnson provide the primary theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Contents

List of Examples, Figures and Tables.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Introduction: Making up Our Minds about what to do with Negro Folk Culture	1
Negro Folk Music	6
Other Aspects of Negro Folk Culture	12
Authenticity.....	14
The Influence of Harlem Renaissance Patrons	16
Art versus Propaganda	19
Literature Review and Methodology	20
Overview of Chapters	26
Chapter I	
Constructing and Performing Authentic Negro Folk Culture:	
The Legacy of the Negro Spirituals from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the Hall Johnson Choir...29	
Part I: Performing the “Reconstructed” New Negro	
The Role of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Establishing Negro Folk Culture as American Culture	34
Part II: The Importance of the Negro Spirituals to the Changing Definition of the New Negro (1890s-1920s).....	46
The Negro Spiritual and Folk Nationalism.....	47
The Evolution of the New Negro from the Great Migration to 1925.....	53
The New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance.....	57
Reclaiming Negro Spirituals in 1925.....	61
Maintaining the “folk quality” of Negro Spirituals in performances by New Negro musicians.....	61
Part III: The Hall Johnson Choir:	
Creating an image of Authenticity and Singing the Ideals of the New Negro.....	68
“Like an Old-Fashioned Negro Camp Meeting”: The Marketing and Reception of The Hall Johnson Choir.....	74
Promoting “Authenticity” in Hall Johnson Choir Publicity Literature	78
Johnson’s Authenticity Narrative	80
Defining the “true Negro spiritual”	86
Performance Practices of the Hall Johnson Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers	91
Conclusion	94

Chapter 2

Dramatizing the Negro Spiritual, Dramatizing the Folk:

The 1933 Production of Hall Johnson's <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	97
Part I: The Script of <i>Run, Little Chillun</i> and Johnson's Religious Journey.....	101
Africanisms and New Negro Ideals in the Theology and Music of the New Day Pilgrims	106
The New Day Pilgrims and Johnson's Spiritual Quest.....	114
Portraying Africanisms in Negro folk culture: Dance in the New Day Pilgrim Scene	120
Portraying the Christianity of Negro Folk Culture.....	129
Part II: The Origins of <i>Run, Little Chillun</i> and its Cultural Climate	137
Is <i>Run, Little Chillun</i> on the "Art" or "Propaganda" side of the New Negro Art versus Propaganda Debate?	142
Part III: Primitivism Perceived as Authenticity in <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	150
<i>Run, Little Chillun</i> 's Audiences and the Exercise of "Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us"	153
Conclusion	157

Chapter 3

A People's Drama:

The Federal Theater Project Production of <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	159
The Federal Theatre Project: Plays "of, by, and for the American People"	162
Setting the Stage for <i>Run, Little Chillun</i> :	166
Plays produced by the Los Angeles FTP Prior to 1938.....	166
Works by Black Playwrights Overlooked by the Los Angeles FTP.....	173
The Los Angeles Negro Unit Production of <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	178
Critic's Responses to The New Day Pilgrims in 1938	181
Conclusion	185
Epilogue.....	187
Appendix.....	195
Bibliography	196

List of Examples, Figures and Tables

Examples

Example 1.2: Processional from <i>Run, Little Chillun</i> (mm 1-9).....	10909
Example 2.2: “Processional,” final eight measures.	111
Example 3.2: Credo intonation from <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	114

Figures

Figure 1.1: Promotional brochure published by Victor Records.	74
Figure 2.1: Aaron Douglas, “Weary As I Can Be” illustration for “Lonesome Place” by Langston Hughes.	76
Figure 3.1: Cover of <i>Fire!!</i>	77
Figure 4.1: Possibly Aaron Douglas?.....	77
Figure 5.2: Top – New Day Pilgrim processional; middle—Hall Johnson; bottom – Revival scene	105

Tables

Table 1.2: Outline of Songs and Events in Finale of <i>Run, Little Chillun</i>	133
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Introduction:

Making up Our Minds about what to do with Negro Folk Culture

It is possible, and not improbable, that an injection of genuine Negro folk-culture may be good for the anemia of the American theatre. If so, who will prove it? Only we who sowed the seed can know the full and potent secret of the flower. The fact that others try to master it and fail (while we are making up our minds what to do with it), should not fill us with resentment, but with pride and fresh determination. With the greatest patience and the best of intentions, all they can ever grasp is—a handful of leaves.

Hall Johnson, 1936

This epigraph comes from Johnson's concluding paragraph of his essay on Gershwin's Opera *Porgy and Bess: An American Folk Opera* published in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*.¹ In it, Hall Johnson posits that Negro folk culture was essential to the development of not only American theater, but American cultural identity.² Because of the importance of Negro folk culture to American culture at large, issues of authenticity and whether one had to be African American in order to compose works successfully about African Americans were crucial, especially to African American composers. For them, promoting Negro folk culture was a powerful way to assert their voice in the national artistic conversation, using their work to address racial inequalities.

Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life was a publication of the National Urban League, a civil rights organization with an interracial authorship and readership that promoted African American studies. However, Johnson explicitly directed the challenge to create American theater that represented genuine Negro folk culture to African American artists. He proclaimed, only "we"

¹ Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess: An American Folk Opera," *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* 14 (1936): 28.

² In this dissertation, my choice of racial descriptors such as "black," "African American," and "Negro" are deliberate. The term "Negro" is employed as it was used by black artists and intellectuals during the time period I cover (for example, "Negro folk culture" or "New Negro"). "Black" is used when describing a general unifying notion of race that includes, African Americans, black Americans of Caribbean descent, and Africans. "African American" is used when I am emphasizing the hybridity of the culture of Americans from the United States who are descendants of slaves.

(African American, or in the parlance of the day—Negro artists), knew and understood the “depths of the roots” of Negro folk culture. Outsiders like Gershwin were incapable of such an important task. To Johnson, the race of the author mattered because authenticity in works portraying Negro folk culture was crucial.

Throughout the review, Johnson challenged Gershwin’s claims of authentically representing Negro folk culture in *Porgy and Bess* because of the magnitude of this assertion. *Porgy and Bess* was considered the first great American opera—a significant descriptor for this all-black-cast opera about impoverished, urban Southern blacks with a score that Gershwin claimed was based on Negro folk music such as spirituals and work songs.³ Gershwin deliberately subtitled his opera “an American Folk Opera”—not a “Negro American Folk Opera” or simply a “Negro Folk Opera.” Gershwin’s claim that his opera, based on Heyward’s novel about poor Charleston South Carolina blacks, was both American and folk stoked the fiery debate during the 1930s over the role of race and folklore in establishing a distinctly American national culture.⁴ Folklorist and musicologist Ray Allen explains that Gershwin, Dubose Heyward, and others considered their opera American and folk in 1935 because the Great Depression was a time when many artists sought material for their work from the common man’s folk traditions.⁵ These artists embraced the idea that cultural pluralism characterized Americanism and emphasized the importance of representing the people. The authenticity of works authored by whites portraying minorities was constantly under scrutiny.

³ Ray Allen, “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward’s “Porgy and Bess,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 117, no. 465 (2004): 243-261. Allen discusses the historical and cultural significance of appending the subtitle “An American Folk Opera” to *Porgy and Bess*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 248.

Despite this, Gershwin's and Heyward's opera is still widely considered to be an American masterpiece.⁶

Yet, Gershwin was not the maverick composer who proved that Negro folk culture could be used as artistic material for opera, nor did he create the genre of American Folk Opera. Hall Johnson's review might well have been an attempt to correct the erroneous commendations granted Gershwin in the popular imagination. There were quite a few African American composers and playwrights who were drawing on Negro folk culture for their theatrical works and operas prior to the premier of Gershwin's work. Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* (1911), Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga!* (1928) and William Grant Still's *Blue Steel* (1934) are all examples of operatic works by established African American composers about black culture that preceded *Porgy and Bess*. Although all of the operas mentioned did not get the performances or recognition they deserved, Hall Johnson's own musical drama *Run, Little Chillun!* (1933) enjoyed a successful run on Broadway during a time when black playwrights were rarely given the opportunity for their dramas performed in prominent theaters.⁷ It was also hailed by critics as a prototype of a Negro folk opera.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 244.

⁷ "Run, Little Chillun is 5th in place for longest Running show," *Chicago Defender*, May 27, 1933. According to this article, Run, Little Chillun had 126 performances at the Broadway Lyric Theater before moving to the Lafayette Theater in Harlem.

⁸ Olin Downes "Final Scene of Hall Johnson's Negro 'Folk-Play' Indicates One Direction for Developing Native Genre," *New York Times*, April 2, 1933; Carl Van Vechten, "On 'Run, Little Chillun!'," *New York Times*, Mar 19, 1933; Al Monroe, "Hall Johnson Starts Something in Drama: 'Run, Little Chillun' May Prove Worth of Good Singing on Stage, *Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1933; Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 196. Musicologist Elise Kirk categorizes *Chillun* as a "folk opera." Downes believed that *Run, Little Chillun* was the prototype of an American Opera. Van Vechten compared Run, Little Chillun to Wagnerian dramas and said that it "partakes equally of the nature of fantasy, opera and ballet." Monroe defined folk drama like *Run, Little Chillun* as "a combination of opera and drama" and claimed that Run, Little Chillun will revive theater in "legitimate houses" during the economic hardship of the Great Depression.

I explore the portrayal of Negro folk culture in concert performances of the Hall Johnson Choir and in Hall Johnson's popular music drama, *Run, Little Chillun*, applying Johnson's critiques of *Porgy and Bess* to his own works. I focus on works composed by Hall Johnson rather than the many productions he and his choir were involved in during the time frame covered by this study. Hall Johnson and his choir were featured in the 1930 Broadway production of *The Green Pastures* 1930 and the 1936 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film based on the play. They were also involved in multiple feature films including *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and provided the music for animated movies and shorts from 1929-1946 including the Walt Disney animated film *Dumbo* (1941).⁹ The majority of these works contained derogatory depictions of African Americans, and all were the products of white creative teams. I focus on works in which Hall Johnson had the most artistic control to give a more personal perspective on his artistic choices. I am also contributing to scholarship that features musical and theatrical depictions of African Americans by African Americans.

I begin with accounts of early performances of the Hall Johnson Choir in the 1920s and end with the Los Angeles Negro unit's Federal Theater Project production of *Run, Little Chillun* in 1938. The performance of choral and musical theater works by Hall Johnson provides a means of understanding the urgency Johnson felt to portray Negro folk culture authentically during a time when African American culture was being considered by white artists as a crucial element of American national culture. By examining the representation of African Americans by an African American, I bring the works of Hall Johnson into scholarly discussions on authorship, authenticity, primitivism and modernism. It also focuses on African Americans' long-term efforts to prove that they possess a history and a culture and are capable of making significant contributions to American culture. I argue that this effort began to achieve national and international recognition shortly after

⁹ For a complete list of films and productions the Hall Johnson Choir performed in, see Eugene Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 110-111.

the Civil War with the performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but was always a goal African Americans were striving toward.

Throughout this dissertation, I posit that the ideology of the Harlem Renaissance informed the way Johnson portrayed Negro folk culture. The Harlem Renaissance elite contemplated and contested the questions: What does it mean to be a New Negro artist? Should black artists create works that promoted politically charged messages about equality? These questions inspired Johnson's artistic choices.

The dissertation spans 13 years (1925-1938)—a period marked by such epic movements and events as the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. During this period, the debate over whether an anti-lynching bill should be passed was revived, then eventually filibustered and set aside in 1938 while lynchings of primarily blacks continued (though less frequently than decades prior to the Depression).¹⁰ Race riots that plagued the country between World War I and II also continued and Jim Crow segregation persisted with particularly insidious effects on African Americans, the majority of whom were severely suffering from the economic depression.¹¹ As Langston Hughes famously stated, "...for the depression brought everybody down a peg or two. And the Negroes had but few pegs to fall."¹² Throughout these years of constant change, racial tensions, and economic uncertainty, African Americans

¹⁰ Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011) 144-164.

¹¹ Ann V. Collins, *All Hell Broke Loose: American Race Riots from the Progressive Era through World War II* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012).

¹² Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 247; Mary C. McComb, *Great Depression and the Middle Class: Experts, Collegiate Youth and Business Ideology, 1929-1941* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22. McComb explains that African Americans experienced much higher rates of unemployment than their white counterparts during the Great Depression, increasing as the Depression continued from twice as high in 1930 to four times as high by 1937.

composed music, danced, wrote plays, novels, and poetry; they celebrated black culture and reclaimed negative stereotypes as an act of asserting their cultural worth as African Americans.

Central to this dissertation are the following ideologies and terminologies that were prominent in African American culture from 1925-1938: the elusive definition of Negro folk culture; the evaluation of Negro folk culture's "authenticity" by Johnson's contemporaries and critics; the role of primitivisms and Africanisms to New Negro artists, musicians, and playwrights during the Harlem Renaissance; and whether art should be used to challenge socio-political issues. A brief discussion of these themes will provide the necessary context within which to explore Johnson's work and significance as a composer and playwright throughout this study.

Negro Folk Music

What is this genuine Negro folk culture that Hall Johnson claimed would breathe new life into American theatre? How did Hall Johnson believe theatrical representations of Negro folk culture were essential to the development of an American cultural identity? I attempt to answer these questions by examining the ways in which Johnson wrote about, portrayed, and performed Negro folk culture. Neither Johnson nor his contemporaries explicitly defined Negro folk culture, but the importance of Negro folk music, tales, and dance to American culture were boldly asserted, contested, and showcased by black intellectuals for decades. I posit that the Negro folk as depicted in dramas, musicals, and operas by both black and white authors during the 1920s-1930s are Southern, uneducated, and poor—and therefore have contributed to the popular definition of Negro folk culture. Negro folk speak in thick Southern dialects and are prone to singing Negro spirituals and worksongs. They are devout Christians, and the protagonists are usually fighting a battle for their soul against the temptations of the modern Babylon of the big city, as in *Porgy and Bess*, or the allure of the Africanized spiritual practice of voodoo as in Eugene O'Neill's 1920 play

Emperor Jones later turned into a movie and opera in the same year (1933), Augustus Smith's play *Louisiana* (1933 later renamed *Drums O' Voodoo* when turned into a film in 1934), and Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*.

In the case of Negro folk music, white missionaries, travelers, and folk song collectors played a role in defining Negro folk music. They published the earliest accounts and transcriptions of Negro folk music sung by slaves during the antebellum period and immediately following the Civil War. The earliest published accounts of Negro folk music came from white authors who held a romanticized view of what they believed to be the slaves' primitive understanding of Christianity. Significantly, *Slave Songs of the United States* published in 1867 is considered the first publication of American folk music (not Negro American or African American).¹³ The songs were collected and transcribed by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison—Harvard and Radcliffe graduates who were also abolitionists. The majority of songs in their collection are Negro spirituals. In the introduction, they promoted the idea that because Negroes created religious songs demonstrating devotion to the Christian faith, the Negro spirituals were proof that blacks were capable of possessing the Christian mores that were the mark of Victorian respectability.¹⁴ This belief was also promoted by the American Missionary Association (AMA), the organization that founded Fisk University.¹⁵ The AMA was a Northern Christian organization that sent missionaries

¹³ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson, 1867) xix; Guy Ramsey, "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, (1996): 19; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 151-154.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 91, 145.

to the South to educate freedmen and instill them with Christian ideology and Victorian manners.¹⁶ These mannerisms and principles associated with social respectability were the mark of fully functioning members of society.¹⁷

With the help of their white music director who held the views of the AMA, the original Fisk Jubilee Singers began performing Negro spirituals in fundraising concerts for their university. The Negro spirituals that the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed were refined versions of what some members of the group sang during slavery. Their polished performance style was meant to show audiences that they were competent classical musicians, and their performances of Negro spirituals were concrete proof to many that African Americans were capable of possessing the comportment and morals necessary to be members of society.¹⁸ It also sought to prove that African American folk culture existed and was respectable—establishing the use of Negro spirituals by African Americans as a means of racial uplift. Because of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' performances, African Americans used Negro spirituals as evidence that Negroes had a valuable folk culture that was both African and American for several generations after the original group's first performance of Negro spirituals. It was a combination of the romanticized ideas of Negro folk music and the performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers that helped establish Negro folk music as a valued American folk genre.

The 1880s and 1890s were the early years of folklore as a scholarly discipline in the United States.¹⁹ American folklorists emphasized the cultural importance of Negro folk music during this

¹⁶Toni P Anderson, *"Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus": The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871-1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 1-25.

¹⁷ Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in The Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham explains that black Baptist church women, and others influenced by similar missionary goals, upheld, promoted and taught this dignified public behavior.

¹⁸ Anderson, 28.

¹⁹ Sandra Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginnings of an American Tradition" (Ph.D dissertation, New York University, 2001), 6; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 129-163;

period, establishing Negro folk music as “America’s true folk music.”²⁰ When the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák encouraged American composers to use Native American and African American folk music as the basis of their compositions, he contributed to further establishing Negro folk music as an important American folk music. Dvořák championed a romantic nationalist ideology, which purported that the folk music of a nation reflected its spirit in its most primitive and pure form. By claiming that Negro folk music was a significant folk music of America, he contributed to elevating the status of Negro folk music and culture during his tenure at the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892-1895.

African American intellectuals wrote about the importance of Negro Spirituals in Negro folk culture and many encouraged black classical composers to use Negro folk music as the basis of their compositions. Perhaps the earliest published definition of Negro folk music by an African American can be found in *The Souls of Black Folk* by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1903). Du Bois, a graduate of Fisk University and the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University, also promoted an overly romanticized slave past and accepted much of the rhetoric of the AMA, re-affirming the notion that because African Americans were capable of creating the Negro spirituals, they possessed the morals that were the mark of respectability.²¹ As an African American intellectual from the North who was born a freeman, Du Bois’s definition of Negro folk music fabricated a romantic image of lower-class Southern blacks very similar to the romanticization of the white authors of *Slave Songs of the United States*. DuBois emphasized both the

Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 241-33; Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 172-173.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ W.E.B Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 100; Toni Anderson, 16.

African and American origins of Negro folk culture, using the Fisk Jubilee Singers as prime examples of how Negro spirituals that were both African and American, performed in the most “respectable” manner of their time, could promote racial uplift.²²

Years later, publications on Negro spirituals followed Du Bois’s example. During the 1920s and 1930s African American philosopher and self-proclaimed “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, wrote about the cultural significance of Negro spirituals. Two publications about Negro spirituals I draw on in this dissertation are his essay “The Negro Spirituals” published in his edited volume *The New Negro* (1925) as well as his book, *The Negro and His Music* (1936).²³ In both works he emphasized the Africanness and Americanness of Negro spirituals, urging composers to use spirituals as the basis of their compositions. He believed that such compositions would be musical proof that African Americans were capable of creating works based on Negro folk culture that were as good as the works of the best white American composers. This would further substantiate the claim that blacks were an intelligent, artistic race with equally American and African roots. Locke was also a huge proponent of choral arrangements and performances of Negro spirituals, praising the Hall Johnson Choir for maintaining the folk quality of the songs and criticizing arrangements of spirituals for solo voice by African American composers like Henry T. Burleigh for lacking a genuine folk quality.²⁴

²² Ibid, 252-3.

²³ Horace Kallen, “Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 54, (February, 1957): 122. Kallen quotes Locke who called himself the “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance.

²⁴ Locke, “The Negro Spirituals,” in *The New Negro*, 199.

²⁴ Ibid. See also Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 22-24.

²⁴ Alain Locke, “The Negro Spirituals” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 208.

²⁴ Ibid, 202, 208-9.

Like Locke, African American author James Weldon Johnson and ethnomusicologist John W. Work III wrote about the importance of the Negro spiritual to American culture which I discuss in this study. James Weldon Johnson wrote two extensive prefaces to *The Book of Negro Spirituals*, the first published in 1925, and the second published a year later. John W. Work III—who was also a composer, music educator, graduate of Fisk University, and director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1947 to 1956—wrote an essay titled “Negro Folk Song” published in *Opportunity* in 1923 that outlined some rhythmic and melodic features of Negro folk song. The message the works of these black intellectuals was the same: African American slaves created Negro folk music that was not an imitation of white American music, but their own unique creation. It fused African and American musical elements; and, it was worthy of being used as foundational material for classical music compositions.

Most significantly (for this study), Hall Johnson also wrote several essays and lectures on the topic of Negro spirituals and folk music, promoting the same message of the importance of Negro folk music to American culture and the creative genius of African American slaves who birthed the genre. Johnson echoed Locke’s claims that choral arrangements rendered the most authentic performance of Negro folk songs because it portrayed the communal setting in which the songs were originally sung. He believed that his choir was the only one performing Negro spirituals in an authentic manner.²⁵

However, Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist and author who collected Negro folklore in Florida and the Bahamas, did not agree with Johnson’s boastful claims. She wrote that the Negro spirituals sung by Jubilee groups and classically trained soloists were “neo-spirituals.”²⁶ Hurston

²⁵ Hall Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 274.

²⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” in *Negro: An Anthology* ed. Nancy Cunard (Ungar Publishing Co., 1970 orig. published 1934), 224.

explained that although they were “Negroid,” they were too polished—the intonation, harmonies, and lack of real, spontaneous improvisations were not authentic representations of how Negro spirituals were really sung.²⁷ For Hurston, Negro spirituals were dissonant, sung with a great deal of improvisation, and most importantly, never performed the same way twice.

Although Du Bois, Locke, Work, James Weldon Johnson, Hall Johnson, and Hurston had slightly different views on what Negro folk music was, they all agreed that Negro spirituals and other Negro folk musics were the unique creations of African American slaves, not mere imitations of the songs of their masters. They also agreed that these songs were both African and American, and that they were important contributions to American culture.

Other Aspects of Negro Folk Culture

Negro folk plays, musical dramas, and operas were not as rigorously described and analyzed as Negro folk music. Theatrical works that were categorized as belonging to the Negro folk genre fit a vague list of descriptors. They often depicted the lives of poor, Southern blacks with very little education, and Negro spirituals were interspersed in the drama. During the 1920s, white American playwrights wrote theatrical works that portrayed the Negro folk as part of an effort to establish a distinctly American theatrical tradition.²⁸ Paul Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1926), Du Bose and Dorothy Heyward’s play *Porgy* (1927), and Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures* (1929), are some examples of dramas considered Negro folk plays of high acclaim by white playwrights. Musicologist

²⁷ Hurston, “The Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Negro: An Anthology*, 31, quoted in Gilroy, 92.

²⁸ Brenda Murphy, “Folk Plays” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre 1st ed. Vol 2.* ed Don Wilmet, Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: 1999. Cambridge Histories Online. Web. 21 November 2013 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521651790>), 307-311.

Ray Allen examines several critics' reviews of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* that explained why it was considered representative of Negro folk culture by some in his essay, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*." Among the reasons provided were: it was a story about Negroes performed by Negroes and there were arias that resembled Negro spirituals, the shout, and camp meetings.²⁹ Allen explains that for Gershwin to call his opera a folktale meant that he and Heyward believed they depicted a homogenous group with traditions and rituals separate from mainstream white society. After studying dramas by Johnson's African American and white contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s, I have found that critics had similar reasons for ascribing certain dramas about African Americans to the Negro folk category.

African American playwrights also sought material from Negro folklore for their plays, laying claim to authentic representations of their race.³⁰ Du Bois believed that plays by African Americans should uplift the race and edify blacks while Locke believed that they should appeal to all racial audiences and not portray controversial socio-political issues. Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* was a Negro folk drama with both music and script authored by an African American, performed on Broadway in 1933 to considerable acclaim by both white and black critics. Critics' responses to productions of *Run, Little Chillun* contain similar remarks: the performance of spirituals and worksongs were true American folk culture and they were performed not only by Negroes, but by "real, genuine, down-south Negroes."³¹

²⁹ Allen, 251.

³⁰ Locke, Introduction: The Drama of Negro Life, in *Plays of Negro Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), 1-6; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," *The Crisis* 32 (July 1926): 134-136; Murphy, 308-9.

³¹ Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 184-186. Fraden discusses reviews that claimed *Run, Little Chillun* represented authentic Negro folk, especially because critics believed that the actors were merely reenacting their lives onstage, completely

Authenticity

A great deal of emphasis was placed on the authenticity of the Hall Johnson Choir by critics, many of whom assumed that the choir authentically portrayed Negro folk culture because they were black and because of Johnson's publicized dedication to accurately representing Negro folk culture. Johnson claimed that when he founded the Hall Johnson Choir in 1925,

I saw clearly that, with the changing times, in a few years any spirituals remaining would be found only in the libraries—and nobody would know how to sing them. I also knew that I was the only Negro musician born at the right time and in the right place ideally suited for years of study of the Negro musical idiom as expressed in the spirituals. I started right in. I had always been a composer and—here was virgin soil. I assembled a group of enthusiastic and devoted souls and we gave our first public concert on February 26, 1926.³²

Johnson positioned himself as an ambassador of Negro spirituals and possessor of rare first-hand knowledge of Negro folk music. He often retold what I have termed an “authenticity narrative”—a biographical account of the composer's life, used to validate his status as author of a work that purports to represent a specific group authentically. His biographical account was published in promotional material for the Hall Johnson choir as well as news articles during productions of *Run, Little Chillun*. His account omits his privileged upbringing, extensive education, and limited connection to the Negro folk.

As early as his creation of the Hall Johnson Choir in 1925, Johnson's goal of accurately portraying African American Negro folk culture showed a dedication to maintaining a Negro spirit and feeling in his choral arrangements and performances of spirituals and work songs. A question

ignoring that many of them were Northerners, and some were highly educated, and they had to learn dialect for the production and actually act.

³² Johnson, 277.

central to this dissertation is: what was this Negro “flavor” that Johnson insisted was necessary for a successful Negro opera yet unsuccessfully utilized in Gershwin’s opera. In his review of Gershwin’s opera he claimed, “while we agree that a composition in a definite racial vein must not necessarily reek in every single measure with that particular style, still, we feel that, in a work of the proportions of *Porgy and Bess*, there should be more than just an occasional flavor.”³³ How did Johnson maintain this Negro “flavor” throughout his compositions? How did his choir’s performances measure up to the critiques of Zora Neale Hurston, who heard very little authenticity in their performances?

Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro

Hall Johnson formed his choir in 1925, the year that Alain Locke’s edited volume, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* was published. It was the height of the Harlem Renaissance (also known as the New Negro Renaissance) when African American artists and intellectuals were defining what it meant to be a New Negro. The term, “New Negro,” was used as early as the Reconstruction period, and the definition of the New Negro changed several times from 1865 to the 1920s to reflect the socio-political climate of each period.³⁴ The New Negro of the 1920s as defined by Alain Locke and others was a race of artists and intellectuals who sought to revolutionize the way the world saw African Americans through their art and literature. These New Negroes drew inspiration from Negro folk culture as well as African culture, reclaiming the negative stereotypes of both. Inspired

³³ Hall Johnson, “Porgy and Bess: An American Folk Opera,” *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* 14 (1936): 26. Johnson criticized musical elements of Gershwin’s operatic style like many other music critics did (recitative, more systematic development in orchestral interludes, etc...) Gershwin can only be expected to write a good opera about Negroes—and he failed at this because he did not capture the Negro flavor completely.

³⁴ Introduction to *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American culture 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3. Gates and Jarrett explain, “The fiction of an American Negro who is ‘now’ somehow ‘new’ or different from an ‘Old Negro’ was sought to counter the image in the popular American imagination of the black as devoid of all the characteristics that supposedly separated the lower forms of human life from the higher forms.”

by European avant garde artists who used African art as inspiration because of its “primitivism,” these New Negroes proclaimed that their African heritage gave them the ability to portray aspects of African cultures more authentically. They used the vogue of African primitivism to their advantage. Despite their distance and ignorance of African cultures, they pieced together a vague African culture based on primitivisms. This African culture included symbols from Egypt and West Africa; images of Egyptian pyramids comingled with barely-clad black dancers unable to resist the beating of the tom-tom. New Negro artists created an identity by reclaiming these stereotypical images that were considered primitive, providing them a creative edge in early 20th century modern art.³⁵ By reclaiming Africanisms that were considered primitive and in vogue, New Negro artists created representations of African American culture that simultaneously challenged racial stereotypes while also accentuating racial essentialisms. As American Studies scholar Stephanie Leigh Batiste states, “The notion of primitivism not only negotiated modernity itself, but also pressed the question of black belonging in the modern world.”³⁶ By reclaiming primitivisms, New Negro artists asserted themselves as artistic equals to their European and white American contemporaries.

The Influence of Harlem Renaissance Patrons

The financial support of wealthy white patrons who were enamored with African and African American primitivism also influenced their African American beneficiaries’ use of primitivisms in New Negro art. Locke’s patron was Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy philanthropist who sought spirituality through involvement with groups she considered primitive

³⁵ Michel Feith, “The Syncopated African: Constructions of Origins in the Harlem Renaissance (Literature, Music, Visual Arts),” in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Fabre, G. & Feith, M. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 51-72, 61, 66-67.

³⁶ Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

such as Native Americans and African Americans.³⁷ After attending a lecture given by Locke in 1927, she moved to Harlem, became Locke's primary patron, and hosted many events in her Park Avenue penthouse where influential African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance gathered.³⁸ Mason believed that African Americans possessed a "mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls, but many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony and make something of it cheap and ugly, commercial and 'white.'"³⁹ As many scholars have noted, Mason's beneficiaries complied with her ideas of preserving the primitive in order to maintain her financial support and Locke was no exception.⁴⁰ Locke introduced Mason to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston who also became her protégés and she considered herself to be Hughes's and Hurston's godmother.⁴¹ Hughes and Hurston eventually severed ties with Mason, both tiring of her controlling nature and excessive emphasis on her views of primitivism.⁴²

Like Hurston and Locke, Hall Johnson had ties to Charlotte Osgood Mason. As Dance historian Anthea Kraut has revealed, correspondence between the three reveals that it is likely that Mason encouraged Johnson to collaborate with Hurston in *Run, Little Chillun*, through a message relayed by Locke.⁴³ There is no evidence that Mason was also Johnson's patron. However, in an

³⁷ Carla Kaplan, *Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance* (New York: Harper, 2013), 200-220.

³⁸ Ibid., 214.

³⁹ Langston Hughes, 316. Also quoted in Anderson, 110.

⁴⁰ Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997) 13; Kraut, 92-95; Anderson, 110-111.

⁴¹ Ibid., 224.

⁴² Ibid., 198; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 110.

⁴³ Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 96.

undated letter she thanks Johnson for his correspondence, indicating that he sent her two letters. She congratulated him on his work with his choir as well as the excellent reviews in the French press about his work with singers in Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* (an all-black review that was first performed in 1928 and revived several times throughout the 1930s). Mason encouraged Johnson to pursue his current projects, urging him to "keep up his courage" and not allow "the horde of human beings who sit on the tail of your flight and continually pin down your wings..." to "eat up" his vitality, inspiration, and financial possibilities.⁴⁴ This letter is evidence that, at one point, Mason was a supporter of Johnson's work (even if that support was not financial).

During the 1920s and 1930s, there were music critics and intellectuals like Alain Locke who favored less-polished performances of Negro spirituals than what was performed by Jubilee groups and classically trained soloists.⁴⁵ The quest for authenticity was wrapped up in this thirst for primitivism—if it was primitive, it was pure, raw, unpolished, and therefore authentic.⁴⁶ Although songs like Negro spirituals were used as a means of racial uplift, proving to the world that African Americans possessed Christian values and mores, when sung by people without any musical training who were either slaves or descendants of slaves, they were considered authentic.⁴⁷

Though many scholars agree that the Harlem Renaissance ended with the onset of the Great Depression, the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance were upheld by many. I posit that Hall *Johnson's Run, Little Chillun* reflects New Negro ideals of the Harlem Renaissance utilizing African

⁴⁴ Simpson, 64. Charlotte Osgood Mason, Letter to Hall Johnson (n.d), The Hall Johnson Collection; Kraut, 92. Kraut believes that Hall Johnson was supported by Mason.

⁴⁵ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1936; reprint, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1968), 22-25.

⁴⁶ Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89-92.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 172-173.

primitivisms and Negro folk culture in keeping with Harlem Renaissance ideals even though it was composed in 1932-1933.⁴⁸

Art versus Propaganda

Reflecting the influence of Harlem Renaissance ideals, Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* ties together the opposing sides of the art versus propaganda debate that was prominent in Harlem Renaissance circles. Both Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois encouraged young playwrights to draw from Negro folk culture when writing new works about African Americans, but with opposing approaches. Alain Locke promoted plays that avoided socio-political issues because he believed plays were "not meant to solve problems or reform society" as it would alienate audiences.⁴⁹ Locke's goal was for New Negro art to reach the broadest interracial audience possible and too much emphasis on socio-political problems would hinder this goal. On the other hand, Du Bois believed that all good art—specifically art produced by African Americans—would contribute to challenging or demolishing some socio-political stereotype or injustice, whether indirectly or directly. Du Bois wanted black playwrights to promote an image of educated, respectable, accomplished blacks as a means of challenging stereotypes and confronting socio-political problems.⁵⁰ Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* portrayed the primitive Africanisms of a pagan cult and the fervent worship of a black Baptist church who sang several Negro spirituals. Although his play was set in the rural Southern

⁴⁸ Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of The Harlem Renaissance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997) xvii-xxi.

⁴⁹ Alain Locke, "Art or Propaganda?" in *Harlem* 1, no. 1 (1928): 12-13.

⁵⁰ Du Bois "Criteria for Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): pp. 290-297; Du Bois "A Questionnaire" *The Crisis*, 31 (February 1926): 165; Du Bois "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed? A Symposium" *The Crisis* 31-33 (March-June, August, September, and November 1926).

community with inhabitants who spoke in a dialect that betrayed their lack of education, he also portrayed the cult leader as a man with an elite education from Oxford University.

Literature Review and Methodology

The art versus propaganda debate is still relevant today, and shapes the way we understand Negro folk plays, musical dramas, and operas of the 1920s – 1930s. When viewing works from this period, it is easy to evaluate them through our 21st century mindset, criticizing the authors for perpetuating stereotypes and pandering to white audiences who would boost box office sales. Though scholarship on Hall Johnson is sparse, most of the few chapters and articles published about Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* fall into two categories. One is to write a revisionist history of Johnson's work, explaining that his depiction of racial stereotypes was an act of resistance. The other approach is to dismiss Johnson's work as merely repeating harmful stereotypes for his personal gain.

I am critical of revisionist history that over-explains the motives of the composer in an attempt to portray their work as an act of resistance. Cultural Anthropologist, E. Quita Craig devoted a chapter to debunking the idea that Johnson employed typical theatrical stereotypes in order to create a box-office success in *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* published in 1980. As theater historian James Hatch explains in the introduction, the book was published shortly after the premiere of the televised drama *Roots*, and many cultural theory scholars did not acknowledge the history of race in America. Therefore, Hatch explains, black scholars bore the burden of educating academia on the black perspective.⁵¹ Craig's book is also one of the first studies on the "lost"

⁵¹ James Hatch, Introduction in E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), vii-x.

archives of the Federal Theater Project found in an old airplane hangar in Baltimore in 1974 and Craig was one of the first to study the plays. In Hatch's introduction, he states, "Drawing on her knowledge of cultural anthropology, Ms. Craig was able to discern how these black writers used the European mode of viewing the world to speak through their plays to the Caucasian audience and, at the same time, how they were able to present the African aesthetic and philosophy to a second audience of Afro-Americans."⁵² The goal of the book is to prove that Africanisms were maintained in Federal Theatre plays written by African American playwrights with a particular emphasis on West Indian influences, which Craig asserts is another form of African culture, on drama. Unlike the vague, constructed Africanisms embraced by New Negro artists, Craig asserts that these Africanisms are legitimate cultural references that she traces back to specific African cultures.

In a chapter titled "Message from Another Culture," Craig provides an explanation of African metaphysics used by black playwrights of FTP plays.⁵³ However she does not indicate the countries or tribes she is references. The chapter ends with two charts comparing Western and vaguely identified African philosophies and the dramatic/artistic process.

Craig believes *Run, Little Chillun* is an experimental drama, and does not believe that Hall Johnson created the plot in order to provide a more realistic theatrical portrayal of the religious life of African Americans. Rather, she believes that the metaphysical conflict which the plot dramatizes explores the very meaning of the universe in terms of traditional African and Christian theologies.⁵⁴ She also quotes Clarence Muse, the director of the Los Angeles FTP production, who stated, "research on African culture is very important before the spirit can be understood" as grounds for

⁵² Ibid., viv.

⁵³ Ibid., 85-96.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 100.

asserting that Johnson researched African culture for the New Day Pilgrim scene.⁵⁵ Craig apparently overlooked Johnson's notes in the original script describing the New Day Pilgrims as a pseudo-African cult that was purposefully meant not to resemble any particular religious sect. She claims that Johnson's play is

...the spectacular story of the synthesis of the African and Western philosophic elements that comprise the Afro-American culture. No black American in the audience could fail to recognize in the play the elements of his African heritage, yet members of the white audience who were unaware of the significance of those elements could still appreciate the play's acknowledged dramatic excellence and the beauty and vitality of Hall Johnson's music.⁵⁶

Yet she provides no primary source evidence to substantiate her claims. Craig attempted to correlate all aspects of Johnson's play that would have been considered African primitivisms to actual African practices because of a politicized agenda to acknowledge African diasporic culture as deserving of scholarly attention.

I am also critical of scholarship that dismisses works like Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* as merely repeating stereotypes. Murphy states that "*Run Little Chillun* represents the African side of African-American culture as primitive, uncontrollable, and dangerous, and the black man's salvation as simple, joyous Christianity."⁵⁷ Similarly, English-literature scholar Rena Fraden claims that the New Day Pilgrim's song and dance scene was in no way an authentic voodoo or African dance, but a replication of every other theatrical voodoo, jungle, and African dance popular in the 1920s-30s.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., 88. Craig is basing this on primary sources at the George Mason University's Federal Theatre Project Collection in the production notebook for the Los Angeles Production and the original play script at the Library of Congress.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁷ Murphy, 309.

⁵⁸ Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre 1935-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170.

However, Fraden bases her observation on a comparison of costumes from photos of the Los Angeles production of *Run Little Chillun* in 1938 to those of the Federal Theater Project's 1936 production of Orson Well's *Voodoo Macbeth*.⁵⁹ As a result, Fraden's analysis is a false assumption that overlooks the rich and varied representation of African Americans in *Run Little Chillun*. After a more careful examination of the play, it becomes obvious that Johnson was carefully portraying an African American religious experience while dramatizing the human struggle with sin and religion. His depiction of African Americans was not without controversy and his claim of authentic representation was complicated. However, *Run, Little Chillun* cannot simply be dismissed as just another folk drama that portrays blacks as naïve and primitive.

Judith Weisenfeld, historian of religion in the United States, agrees that there is far more to Johnson's play than a showcase for Johnson's choir with a plot that ensured ticket sales. She published an article titled, "'The Secret at the Root': Performing African American Religious Modernity in Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*" (2011).⁶⁰ Weisenfeld seeks to prove that Johnson was promoting an alternative theology to Christianity through a modernist representation of African American spirituality. In order to contextualize *Run, Little Chillun*, she positions Johnson's drama in relation to *The Green Pastures*, a Negro folk play by white playwright Marc Connelly that featured the Hall Johnson Choir. Weisenfeld points out the social and economic difficulties Johnson faced as an African American artist attempting to realistically portray his race in the entertainment industry. Though Johnson criticized the representation of blacks in the *The Green Pastures* in the 1940s (several years after the MGM film version), he did not quit his role as musical director for the stage version

⁵⁹ Fraden, 152-4. *Voodoo Macbeth* was Wells's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for an all-black cast in which the location of Scotland was changed to Haiti and voodoo replaced the witchcraft in the original play.

⁶⁰ Judith Weisenfeld, "'The Secret at the Root': Performing African American Religious Modernity in Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 21 (2011): 39-80.

or the movie and benefitted greatly from his involvement in these projects.⁶¹ Weisenfeld also suggests that Johnson took advantage of his reputation as arranger of Negro spirituals for *The Green Pastures* when creating his play.

I build on Weisenfeld's scholarship by placing Johnson's work in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. The writings of Alain Locke and W.E.B Du Boise provide a theoretical framework for understanding Johnson's creative choices and the ways in which he marketed his choir and presented his own origin story. Ideologies and theories such as racial uplift ideology, Locke's cosmopolitan nationalism, and Du Bois's double consciousness are employed because they contribute not only historical context, but relevant intellectual framework for understanding the importance and impact of Hall Johnson's work. As musicologist Marva Griffith Carter claims, Hall Johnson was "a notable New Negro who ventured to Harlem in the early 1900s and recaptured Africanisms as well as the unique spirit of African American folksongs."⁶² I expand on her scholarship, even challenging her acceptance of the belief that Johnson's arrangements, and Hall Johnson Choir's performance of Negro Spirituals "embodied traditional folk characteristics."⁶³

Conversely, scholars who view the Hall Johnson Choir performances and his musical drama as just another stereotypical "sell out" production misunderstand the ideas of racial uplift that Locke and Johnson held. There are some very clear parallels between Locke and Johnson's writings, especially on the importance of performing Negro spirituals in choral settings for authenticity. Finally, as stated earlier, Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* draws from both Locke's and Du Bois's contrasting arguments on the role of propaganda in art by African Americans. It is my hope that by

⁶¹ Ibid, 44-45.

⁶² Marva Griffin Carter, "The 'New Negro' Legacy of Hall Johnson," in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 187.

⁶³ Ibid., 192.

revealing the connection between Hall Johnson's works and these Renaissance philosophers, Johnson's works can be better understood as part of this milieu.

Newspaper reviews from both the African American press and the mainstream press also play an essential role in situating the performances of the Hall Johnson Choir and *Run, Little Chillun* within its cultural environment. The conversations, and at times, debate between critics over performances of Johnson's work reveal contemporary perspectives on primitivism and modernism and the role of Negro folk culture in American national culture.

Although the theories of Locke and Du Boise as well as the reviews of contemporary critics are the primary sources I use as an analytical framework, there are a few sociological theories that have played a less-direct role in my study. Racial formation theory posited by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their seminal text, *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986, updated in 1994) is one overarching theory that has driven my research. In racial formation theory, race is defined as a dynamic and fluid socially constructed identity that pervades all aspects of society in the United States "from the shaping of individual identities to the structuring of collective political action on the terrain of the state."⁶⁴ Building on Omi and Winant's idea of Racial Formation sociologist Paul Wong extends the racial formation perspective to include ethnicity and nationality in *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the United States*. Claiming that nation and nationality have been largely neglected in research on race and ethnicity, Wong emphasizes the importance of analyzing the intersection of ethnicity, class, and race in a historical materialist framework.⁶⁵ Historian Reynolds J. Scott-Childress has taken on this challenge, and

⁶⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

⁶⁵ Paul Wong, Introduction to *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the United States: Toward the Twenty-First Century* ed. Paul Wong (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 3.

addresses the difficulty of defining race and nation in historical context in his introduction to *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*. He discusses the history of race and ethnicity in the United States, suggesting that race and nation are phenomena that beg for multiple theoretical approaches.⁶⁶

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1, “Constructing and Performing Authentic Negro Folk Culture: The Legacy of the Negro Spirituals from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the Hall Johnson Choir,” opens with a review of a Fisk Jubilee Choir concert, written by Olin Downes in 1933. Downes unfavorably compares them to the Hall Johnson Choir, claiming that the Fisk Jubilee Singers did not perform Negro spirituals as authentically as the Hall Johnson Choir. Using this review as an entry point into the historical significance of this comparison, the first part of the chapter is devoted to a brief history of the Negro spirituals that focuses primarily on the construction of Negro folk culture and how it became widely considered as America’s folk culture from Reconstruction to the 1890s. It also serves to place the work of the Hall Johnson Choir in the broader historical trajectory of performances of Negro spirituals that promoted an image of the Negro folk as southern and usually rural. The second part of this chapter highlights the views on the importance of Negro folk culture held by black intellectuals such as W.E.B Du Bois, Alain Locke, William Work, and John Rosamond Johnson. The third part of the chapter focuses on the Hall Johnson Choir. This chapter covers the marketing of the choir as authentic in press releases and promotional bulletins, Hall Johnson’s “authenticity narrative,” and what Hall Johnson believed

⁶⁶ Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, Introduction to *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*, ed. Reynolds J. Scott-Childress (New York: Garland Publication, 1999), xii.

constituted an authentic performance of Negro folk music. It ends with a comparison of the performance practice of the Hall Johnson Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, considering Zora Neale Hurston's definition of "real" Negro spirituals. I discuss how performances of the Hall Johnson Choir compare to that of the Fisk Jubilee Singers based on recordings of both groups from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Because *Run, Little Chillun* was one of the most popular music dramas of the 1930s that received rave-reviews for its dramatization of Negro spirituals and Negro folk culture, and the only one with both book and music written by a single African American, the following two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to this work. Chapter 2, "Dramatizing the Negro Spiritual, Dramatizing the Folk: The 1933 Productions of Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*" focuses on the popular Broadway run in 1933. Also divided into three parts, the first part of this chapter begins with a synopsis of the drama and then examines possible parallels between Johnson's personal life and the protagonist in the drama. I also explore personal and cultural influences that led Johnson to create the New Day Pilgrims, a fictitious religious cult that promoted a Black Nationalist and Afrofuturistic message. The second part of this chapter examines the economic and artistic influences on the creation of *Run, Little Chillun*, especially the New Negro ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. The chapter ends with a discussion of critic's reviews of *Run, Little Chillun*, focusing on why some believed the representations of African Americans in Johnson's drama were genuine representations of Negro folk culture.

The final chapter, "A People's Drama: The Federal Theater Project Production of *Run, Little Chillun*," explores the significance of the Los Angeles Federal Theatre Project producing *Run, Little Chillun* in 1938. Johnson's drama was chosen in response to protests from the black actors in the Negro unit for the opportunity to perform plays that were written and directed by African Americans. I posit that the directors of the Los Angeles Negro unit were not as conservative as

scholar Rena Fraden has claimed, and I push back against assertions that *Run, Little Chillun* was only selected because it perpetuated racial stereotypes and did not challenge the audience to engage with any socio-political issues. I compare *Run, Little Chillun* to the dramas performed by the Los Angeles Negro unit prior to the production of *Run, Little Chillun* to provide context for my argument. I also compare Johnson's drama to other FTP dramas by black playwrights that could have been selected by the Los Angeles unit for further contextualization. The chapter concludes with a discussion about why the reception of the 1938 production was very similar to the 1933 production and how critics of both the black and white press seemed to be largely unaffected by Johnson's additional program notes for the FTP production.

Chapter 1

Constructing and Performing Authentic Negro Folk Culture: The Legacy of the Negro Spirituals from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the Hall Johnson Choir

The new Fisk Choir of mixed voices has been very carefully trained.... If a chorus which sang folk music from some province of England or France had been our visitor, it would never have dreamed of such conventional and stiff-necked treatment of good patois and idioms of the soil.... And if any one feels that this is carping criticism, or a failure to recognize the greatness of the work done at Fisk in so many departments of education and sociology, let him compare last night's singing of spirituals with the manner of the singing in the drama of "Porgy," or the performances of the Hall Johnson Choir in "Green Pastures," which contributed so memorably to the effect of that production."

Olin Downes, 1933⁶⁷

In 1933, the chief music critic of the New York Times, Olin Downes, reviewed a Fisk University Choir concert at Carnegie Hall. He praised the group's tone quality, balance, rhythm, and phrasing, but was disappointed in what he called the 'correctness and constraint' of the singers. He explained that the Fisk University Choir were suffering from the

...misdirected effort in training these singers to attack passages from the standpoint of the vocalism of the white. The result only robbed the listener of the rich, if often guttural, quality of the Negro voice, and apparently served to put the singers in straitjackets of interpretation.⁶⁸

Downes highlighted the differences between the performance styles of each group favoring the Hall Johnson Choir's performances as more authentic because they captured the "frenzy of the primitive, religious revival."⁶⁹ According to Downes, the Fisk Choir's performance style gave them an air of

⁶⁷ Olin Downes, "Fisk University Choir of 60 Voices Wins Plaudits in First Concert Here at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times* (Jan 27, 1933).

⁶⁸ Ibid.; Carol J. Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro': The Background of William Grant Still's 'Afro-American Symphony,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 22, Supplement: Best of BMRJ (2002): 114-115. Downes also leveled similar critique at William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, claiming that the African American composer was so influenced by his European teacher, Edgar Varesè, that Still's symphony did not sound Negro enough. Downes preferred Still's musical theater works for Negro revues.

⁶⁹ Downes, 1933, 12.

stuffiness that was not “natural,” whereas the Hall Johnson Choir’s performance style was more “authentic.”

Downes’s assessment of the 1933 Fisk Choir performance garnered mixed responses from esteemed black intellectuals. W.E. B. Du Bois (African American sociologist and lifelong supporter of the Fisk Jubilee Singers) retorted in an article in *Crisis*, “The Negro chorus has a right to sing music of any sort it likes and to be judged by its accomplishment rather than by what foolish critics think it ought to be doing.”⁷⁰ Alain Locke (African American philosopher and self-proclaimed “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance) responded to the same article by Downes in an entirely different manner.⁷¹ Unlike Du Bois, Locke agreed with Downes’s criticism, explaining that Downes was not telling these groups to limit themselves to one form of expression, but to “develop a great and unique musical style out of the powerful musical dialect which we have in our most characteristic folk-songs. . . Two Victor recordings of the Hall Johnson Chorus illustrate how this double uniqueness of singing style and folk melodies can be effectively used.”⁷² Like Downes, Locke also used the Hall Johnson Choir as an example of how the university jubilee groups and choirs can combine what he described as “primitive” folk elements with aspects of highbrow European music to create a “double uniqueness of singing style.”⁷³

More important than a debate about whether or not the Fisk Jubilee Choir were stiff or natural was the suggestion that they were not genuine by both Olin Downes and Alain Locke. That the Hall Johnson Choir was considered authentic because they captured, as Downs explained, the

⁷⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Our Music,” *Crisis* 40 (July 1933): 165.

⁷¹ Locke quoted by Horace Kallen, “Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 5 (February, 1957): 122.

⁷² Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1936; reprint, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1968) 24-25.

⁷³ *Ibid.*.

“frenzy of the religious revival” indicates a much deeper issue concerning ideas of cultural authenticity. What role did the Hall Johnson Choir play in establishing what constitutes a “genuine, authentic” performance of Negro spirituals? Why was it such a debated topic during the 1930s, and why is it significant that the Fisk Choir was compared to the Hall Johnson Choir? Lastly, can these arrangements and performance styles really be deemed “assimilationist”? I explore the roots of this debate by tracing the performance of the Negro spirituals back to those of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers during the Reconstruction period, because without the path-breaking work of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, there would be no Hall Johnson Choir. Furthermore, the history of the performance and construction of Negro folk culture places the work of the Hall Johnson Choir in the broader historical trajectory of performances of Negro spirituals that drew heavily on images of the rural South in programs and promotional materials.

To this end, the first two parts of this tripartite chapter are devoted to examining the significance of the Negro spiritual in the construction of an image of the Negro folk and of the New Negro from 1871 to the 1920s. Since the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ national and international concert tour served to establish Negro folk culture as a crucial part of American culture, a significant portion of this chapter details how Negro folk culture became a part of New Negro identity and American culture in general. Part One examines how the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performances of Negro spirituals established a widely accepted definition of Negro folk culture. The second part of this chapter traces important historical events that helped to further emphasize the importance of Negro folk culture to various groups who identified as New Negroes from the 1890s to the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. A special emphasis is placed on how black intellectuals viewed the Negro spirituals as a part of Negro folk culture that was also an essential contribution to the broader American culture.

In the third part of this chapter, I engage with the debate on what constitutes an “authentic performance of Negro spirituals” by comparing the performance styles of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hall Johnson Choir. I use recordings of both groups from the 1920-30s as well as choral arrangements of spirituals they performed and recorded. Zora Neale Hurston’s definition of a “true Negro spiritual” are compared to the performance practices of the Hall Johnson Choir and Fisk Jubilee Singers. I examine her published statements that Hall Johnson’s arrangements and choral performances of Negro Spirituals were just as inauthentic as the Fisk Jubilee Singers’.⁷⁴ In her articles “Characteristics of Negro Expression” and “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” (both published in Nancy Cunard’s 1934 book *Negro: An Anthology*), Hurston bemoaned the tendency of African American musicians to turn what she believed to be genuine Negro spirituals into songs suitable for “concert artists and glee clubs.”⁷⁵ Calling these arrangements of spirituals “Neo-Spirituals,” Hurston sought to expose the compositional approaches to arranging spirituals as assimilationist and inauthentic—a definitive contrast from Olin Downes’s praise of the Hall Johnson Choir which opened this chapter.

Scholarship on the Negro spiritual has not focused on tracing the history of the performance of these songs, specifically focusing on the construction of Negro folk culture from the performance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers to those of groups like the Hall Johnson Choir in the 1930s.⁷⁶ The

⁷⁴ Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 32.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁶ There has been scholarly work published on the socio-cultural implications of Negro Spirituals such as Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) and Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). While I draw from both of these important works, neither deal specifically with the role performances of Negro spirituals played in establishing Negro folk culture. Likewise, there are some notable scholarly works on the Fisk Jubilee Singers that this dissertation relies on such as Sandra Graham, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginnings of an American Tradition” (Ph.D dissertation, New York University, 2001); Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff, *To do This, You Must Know How: Music Pedagogy in the Black Gospel Quartet Tradition* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

exception to this is Marva Griffin Carter's essay, "The 'New Negro' Choral Legacy of Hall Johnson."⁷⁷ Carter has provided a brief history that credited the Fisk Jubilee Singers with paving the way for the performance of spirituals during the New Negro Renaissance. More significantly, she is the first scholar to have placed the Hall Johnson Choir within the context of the New Negro Renaissance. I build on her scholarship to further emphasize that the trends of promoting and performing Negro spirituals popular during the Harlem Renaissance has its basis in much more than the legitimizing support from European composers such as Antonín Dvořák. I posit that though Dvořák's and other European artists' utilization and validation of Negro culture was certainly a boon for African American artists' drive to uplift the race by incorporating these art forms in their work, it was not the originating motivation. I examine the ways in which prominent African American intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, John W. Work III, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston and of course, Hall Johnson defined Negro folk culture. My particular focus is on how they perceived the role spirituals played in defining this culture as well as their belief in the significance of Negro spirituals in American national culture.

2013); Toni P. Anderson, *"Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus": The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871-1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Yet none of these studies link the work of the Fisk Jubilee Singers to that of other groups such as the Hall Johnson Choir, nor do they discuss the Jubilee singer's role in constructing Negro folk culture.

⁷⁷ Marva Griffin Carter, "The 'New Negro' Legacy of Hall Johnson," in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 185-201.

Part I
Performing the “Reconstructed” New Negro:
The Role of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Establishing Negro Folk Culture as
American Culture

The Fisk Choir that performed in Carnegie Hall in 1933 came from a long tradition of establishing that Negro folk culture was appropriate for uplifting the race through the performance of spirituals. Prior to attending the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ concerts, many of their white audiences’ only exposure to black culture had been through the demeaning minstrel show. By adhering closely to Victorian etiquette and a dignified stage persona akin to that of classical musicians, the original Fisk Jubilee Singers changed the way many whites viewed the performance of Negro folk songs. Their performances helped to further the already burgeoning idea that Negro folk songs such as the spirituals were truly *American* folk songs. Consequently, they also sought to prove that blacks could assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Fisk University was established in 1866 by the American Missionary Association—a Northern Christian organization dedicated to the mission of equipping newly freed slaves to become fully functioning members of society. Their goal was to send missionaries to educate freedmen and instill them with Christian mores that were associated with social respectability. It was because of this missionary movement that many newly freed slaves began to adapt a “politics of respectability,” a belief that public behavior in the form of “temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals” would convince white America that blacks were respectable.⁷⁸ Because of the influence of this education, they were instrumental in transforming (or reconstructing, if you

⁷⁸ Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in The Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham explains that black Baptist church women, and others influenced by similar missionary goals, upheld, promoted and taught this dignified public behavior.

will) the negative, stereotypical public perceptions of African Americans, what would later come to be known as the “Old Negro.”⁷⁹ The Fisk Jubilee Singers, formed a year after Fisk University was founded, contributed to demonstrating the success of the AMA’s education through their performances to audiences throughout the United States and internationally during the Reconstruction period. Their performances embodied the essence of racial uplift.

As early as the Civil War, when Union armies began freeing slaves, the AMA established schools and churches for freedmen. During the decades following Emancipation, they founded over 500 schools and several historically black colleges and universities (referred to as HBCUs); among them were Atlanta University, Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), and Howard University.⁸⁰ However, racist rhetoric abounded in the activities and teachings of the AMA, promoting the idea that African Americans were docile, impressionable, and in need of Northern white Christians to show them the proper way of life. Nevertheless, W.E.B. Du Bois believed,

The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the defilement of the places where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the songs of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions in New England.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, Introduction to *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American culture 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3. Gates and Jarrett explain, “The fiction of an American Negro who is ‘now’ somehow ‘new’ or different from an ‘Old Negro’ was sought to counter the image in the popular American imagination of the black as devoid of all the characteristics that supposedly separated the lower forms of human life from the higher forms.” They further explain, “In an accurate, if humorous, sense, blacks have felt the need to attempt to ‘reconstruct’ their image probably since that dreadful day in 1619, when the first boatload of Africans disembarked in Virginia.”

⁸⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145. See also Toni P. Anderson, 1-11.

⁸¹ W.E.B Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 100. Also quoted in Toni Anderson, 16.

Du Bois held the work of the AMA in high esteem because he saw more value than detriment in the ideology of the AMA. He also possibly internalized the idea that superior (which to him meant better educated and cultured) people needed to lead the way for those lacking education and refinement.

Gates and Jarrett claim that reforming former slaves and uneducated blacks into educated, respectable citizens in order to obliterate racist perceptions of blacks was also the trope of the New Negro. However, they believe that this was the case between the end of Reconstruction and WWII due to the intellectual output (measured by books and novels published) of African Americans. The Reconstruction Era, which lasted from 1865 to 1877, was, they state, not really part of this intellectual reconstruction of the New Negro, even though organizations like the AMA almost literally undertook the task of “reconstructing” freedmen.⁸² Gates and Jarrett believe that because only two novels written by black people were published during the Reconstruction period, it was not a period of significant intellectual rebirth.⁸³ However, I argue that although the Reconstruction Era was not a renaissance of the New Negro in African American letters—it was in music—even if this music was arranged, performances managed, and folksongs collected mainly by white people—many of whom were connected in some way to the AMA.⁸⁴ The performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers played an integral role in the intellectual and artistic reconstruction of the Old Negro. Even W.E.B DuBois and James Weldon Johnson believed this (although DuBois never used the term “New Negro” in his descriptions and praise of the Fisk Jubilee Singers).⁸⁵ In many ways, the singers

⁸² Ibid.. They state, “In other words, Reconstruction was not a time of a great renaissance of African American letters, but the period between this moment and World War II was the era of the myth of a New Negro, a New Negro in search of a cultural renaissance capable of accommodating it.”

⁸³ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁴ Toni P. Anderson, 1-25.

⁸⁵ Toni P. Anderson, xii, 98; Gilroy, 89-92; DuBois, 250-254.

performed the “reconstructed Negro” that embodied the politics of respectability, musically articulating the New Negro, long before the “intellectuals” wrote about it.

While the Fisk Jubilee Singers, their teachers at the university, choir director, and the clergy who supported them, were actively reforming the Old Negro through their performances, the Reconstruction Era was well under way. Beginning in 1865, radical republicans in congress sought to bring the South into the “rights and privileges of the Union” during this new era in American history. To obtain this goal, Congress established the Freedmens Bureau to provide practical government assistance to newly freed slaves.⁸⁶ They also passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 that declared all U.S. citizens equal—regardless of race, as well as three amendments to the constitution to reinforce the civil rights of African Americans.⁸⁷

Inevitably, Congress’s actions were met with an incredible amount of opposition from white Southerners, including President Andrew Johnson.⁸⁸ Each of the “Reconstruction Amendments” were fiercely opposed. The Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibits both the federal and state government from denying citizens the right to vote based on “race, color, or previous conditions to servitude” especially terrified white supremacists. Southern states enacted scare tactics to prevent African Americans from voting such as poll taxes and literacy tests, and the enfranchisement of

⁸⁶ Foner, 69-70, 153-169. The Bureau provided government assistance to freedmen in a variety of practical ways—most famously, dividing abandoned land into forty-acre plots and distributing them, along with a mule, to freedmen and loyal refugees. Many white Southerners and conservative republicans, including President Andrew Johnson resented the Bureau, and it eventually lost its funding in 1869.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 118. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 declared that all men born in the United States—regardless of race—were equal citizens. Three amendments were ratified to the constitution: the Thirteenth Amendment (ratified in 1865) abolished slavery except as punishment for a crime, the Fourteenth Amendment (ratified in 1868) prohibited the States from denying the provisions of the Civil Rights Act to African Americans, the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) prohibited both the federal and state government from denying citizens the right to vote based on “race, color, or previous conditions to servitude.” Southern States were forced to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment in order to regain representation in Congress.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 251-260.

blacks during Reconstruction led to the prominence of terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.⁸⁹ Founded in 1866 in Tennessee (the same state as Fisk University) as a social club, the KKK spread quickly throughout the South. Clansmen committed violent acts against anyone who threatened the socio-political power structure of the South (which included white Radical Republicans, poor whites, and blacks), claiming that Radical Reconstruction was politically illegitimate.⁹⁰

In the midst of this threatening vigilantism, and with the support of the federal government and the AMA, the Fisk Jubilee Singers began their career—performing and guiding the reformation of the freedmen and women. Because the Fisk Jubilee Singers were former slaves who dared to perform the Negro Spirituals for mostly white audiences, they were considered folk heroes.

According to literary scholar Houston Baker,

The Fisk Jubilee Singers, who carried the actual sound of Afro-American spiritual strivings—the articulate cries of slaves to the world—before enraptured audiences both at home and abroad, offer a trope for the merger of immanent folk heroism, Western cultural masterpieces, and the sound of African spirituality that rends the Veil and portends salvific edifices of melody for the South.⁹¹

This idea of the Fisk Jubilee Singers “articulating cries of slaves to the world” and being a beacon of “folk heroism” encapsulates what the group came to represent to black scholars for several generations.⁹² Ethnomusicologist Sandra Graham points out that while the Fisk Jubilee Singers are known for singing concertized versions of Negro spirituals, the commonly held story that their music director, George L. White “let them sing ‘their own music’” in successful fund-raising

⁸⁹ Ibid. 422-425. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 163-215.

⁹⁰ Foner, 342; Hahn, 265-6.

⁹¹ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 66.

⁹² Some notable black intellectuals who esteemed the Fisk Jubilee singers: James Monroe Trotter’s *Music and Some Highly Musical People* published in 1878 to WEB DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Hall Johnson, and Richard Wright, and to later 20th century scholars such as Houston Baker and musicologist, Eileen Southern. Graham discusses these publications in detail on pp. 1-50.

concerts misconstrues the real story of the birth of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. This popular version of their story was promoted primarily by musicologist Eileen Southern, but is based on two books written for the promotion of the Fisk Jubilee Singers during the 1870s and 1880s by members of the American Missionary Association.⁹³ However, it is a highly romanticized version of the actual story of how the singers became icons of “folk heroism” by performing Negro spirituals and simultaneously representing the reconstructed Negro.

As Graham explains, contrary to this story of folk heroes triumphing over racism with performances of Negro Spirituals, the Fisk Jubilee Singers never originally intended to sing spirituals in public—some even found the songs degrading.⁹⁴ Although the Fisk Jubilee Singers are most notably remembered for their popularization of the spirituals, they did not immediately begin incorporating spirituals into their concert programs. In fact, many students protested singing these songs in public as they felt that they were too backwards and reminiscent of slavery.⁹⁵ Singing spirituals felt like a terrible regression in their constant battle against the negative image of slavery and portrayals of Negro folk culture in minstrel shows.

Performing under the title of Colored Christian Singers, the troupe would sing in praise meetings for church groups in the hopes of ensuring an audience for the paid concerts.⁹⁶ George White decided that spirituals would be sung only during the praise meetings and as encores for the concert, but spirituals had no place on the main concert programs. Instead, the singers would

⁹³ GD Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873); JBT Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers, With Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1880). These are the primary publications.

⁹⁴ Graham, 117.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ J.B.T. Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* (New York: Dover, 2003), 26. Prior to their initial concert tour, the troupe had been described as “a band of negro minstrels who call themselves Colored Christian Singers.”

perform songs from operatic repertory such as what became known as the Risorgimento chorus from Verdi's *Ernani* and Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre's cantata, *Esther* – two operatic works that came to symbolize declarations of freedom from oppressed people.⁹⁷ In addition to this, they would sing popular parlor songs from minstrel shows such as Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home," which seems perplexingly contradictory, since the lyrics portray a romanticized version of slavery from the unrealistic perspective of a black slave who longs for the carefree days on the plantation. Included in their programs were also patriotic songs such as "Hail America" and "The Star Spangled Banner," temperance songs, and folk songs made popular by contemporary artists such as the Hutchinson Family Singers and Jenny Lind.⁹⁸ Through these programs, White sought to show that the singers possessed all the ideal attributes of a respectable American citizens: allegiance to their country, Christian mores, the ability to sing parlor songs (a predominantly middle-class tradition), and the refinement, education, and skill required to sing operatic songs.⁹⁹ Additionally, he wanted to prove that the students were capable of singing in a variety of styles.

The Christian Colored Singers and their director soon discovered that their performances of Negro spirituals, though rare and confined to encores or praise meetings, were very popular with audiences. This can be credited to a longstanding romanticization of what was viewed as the slave's primitive version of Christianity that fascinated many white audience members. The published accounts of missionaries, travelers, and folk song collectors who wrote of their visits to Southern plantations helped to promote interest in what they saw as Negro spirituals' primitive, crude, yet

⁹⁷ Philip Gossett, "Becoming a citizen: The Chorus in Risorgimento Opera," in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2, 1 (1990), 41-64; 52-53, 56.

⁹⁸ Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 126.

⁹⁹ For more information on the middle-class practice of performing parlor songs for entertainment see Nicolas E. Tawa, *Sweet Songs for Gentle Americans: The Parlor Song in America, 1790-1860* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980), 22, 46.

beautiful qualities.¹⁰⁰ The most significant of these was *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867)—the first publication of a collection of Negro spirituals, also considered to be the first publication of American folk music.¹⁰¹ The spirituals were collected by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, Harvard and Radcliffe graduates and abolitionists who transcribed spirituals they heard in the South Sea Islands, South-Eastern Slave States, Northern Seaboard Slave States, Inland Slave States, and Gulf States. As Guthrie Ramsey notes, their 38-page introduction was laced with Eurocentric, paternalistic language that reflected the ideology of the AMA.¹⁰² They promoted the idea that spirituals could be used to prove that blacks were capable of possessing Victorian ideals of respectability, which provided the perfect opportunity for the Fisk Jubilee Singers to successfully promote the image of the New Negro.

Not long after their first concert, White decided to name the group “The Jubilee Singers.” The title seemed fitting since, according to the Old Testament book of Leviticus, every 50 years Jews were to declare a “Year of Jubilee” when slaves were to be freed and debts forgiven.¹⁰³ Because the Fisk students were recently freed slaves, this new title both helped with advertising concerts and brought a new sense of dignity and professionalism to the group. Gradually, spirituals were added to their concert programs, at first strategically placed in the final half of the program.¹⁰⁴ Thus began the

¹⁰⁰ See Part III of Epstein for a thorough history of publications of Negro spirituals with musical transcriptions during the Civil War, 241-331. See Cruz for a discussion on the process of edifying black culture through transcriptions and publications of Negro spirituals, 129-165. See Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for a discussion on the romanticization of the primitivism in black folk song by early transcribers, 172-173.

¹⁰¹ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson, 1867).

¹⁰² Guy Ramsey, “Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 16, no. 1 (1996): 11-42; 19. See Also Cruz, 151-154.

¹⁰³ Leviticus 25:8-13.

¹⁰⁴ Graham, 127. It is common practice for concert managers and directors to place songs that might stir controversy in the second half of the concert after audiences have had a chance to enjoy the first half. It is a

tradition of including spirituals in a concert with other vocal standards in the hopes of raising the status of the songs. Eventually, even more spirituals were added to programs, requiring the group to expand their repertory. To do so meant conjuring up memories of spirituals, notating and arranging the song, and rehearsing them.¹⁰⁵ Copies of these collections of spirituals were published and sold after concerts. Some songs were even published in promotional materials such as *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* by J.B.T. Marsh.¹⁰⁶ These publications helped to further the popularity of Negro spirituals, securing the songs a permanent place in American national culture.

The Jubilee singers “elevated” the style in which they sang the spirituals by not “shouting” them or including the mellifluous moans, improvisatory harmonies, and blue notes that were characteristic of spirituals as sung in their original contexts. “Shouting” spirituals was a manner of worship where participants would gather in a circle and sing a spiritual while walking or dancing in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction, the pace often becoming increasingly faster, bringing participants to a climax that has been described by observers as “barbaric” and “frenzied.” When they reached the height of their fervor, the spiritual sung by the shouters turned into loud chanting and they reached a state of spiritual ecstasy, often collapsing to the ground from exhaustion.¹⁰⁷ The origins of the shout have been traced back to West African religious practices.¹⁰⁸ By not “shouting” the spirituals and by performing them without much of the improvisatory characteristics of spirituals

general rule that controversial songs are never placed at the beginning of a program because of the possibility that audiences would become disconcerted and leave after the first half. In addition to this, if controversial pieces are placed at the end of a program, audiences could take the liberty of leaving before the concert is over.

¹⁰⁵ Graham, 130.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁷Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1997), 182-3.

¹⁰⁸ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16.

as they were sung by slaves, the Fisk Jubilee Singers excised a pertinent characteristic of the tradition of worship as practiced by slaves. Instead, they presented and made popular a new, refined manner of singing spirituals that promoted the image of the New Negro in the 1870s. They accomplished this by associating themselves “with a musical mainstream at the same time that their race and their spirituals differentiated them from that mainstream.”¹⁰⁹

Because of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ success, other historically black colleges adopted a similar fundraising model and formed Jubilee groups such as the Tuskegee Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Jubilee Singers.¹¹⁰ The popularity of HBCU Jubilee performances led to imposter Jubilee groups, often claiming affiliation with a fabricated university. Parodies of Jubilee performances in minstrel shows were also common.¹¹¹ In fact, such was the longstanding popularity of Jubilee singing groups that nearly five decades after the founding of the Fisk Jubilee singers, the Hall Johnson Negro Choir’s first appearance at the International House in New York was under the title of Harlem Jubilee Singers.¹¹² In 1887, the music publishing company O. Ditson published a collection of songs titled *Jubilee and Plantation Songs: Characteristic Favorites, As Sung By The Hampton Students, Jubilee Singers, Fisk University Students, And Other Companies*.¹¹³ A second edition of this same volume of songs was re-published in 1915 showing the popularity of music sung by jubilee groups.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Graham 259-260.

¹¹⁰ J.B.T. Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1880) 19-20.

¹¹¹ Graham, 317-36. Includes a thorough discussion on imitation Jubilee groups.

¹¹² Eugene Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 5.

¹¹³ *Jubilee And Plantation Songs: Characteristic Favorites, As Sung By The Hampton Students, Jubilee Singers, Fisk University Students, And Other Companies* (Boston: O. Ditson, 1887).

¹¹⁴ *Jubilee And Plantation Songs: Characteristic Favorites, As Sung By The Hampton Students, Jubilee Singers, Fisk University Students, And Other Companies*, 2nd ed (Boston: O. Ditson, 1915).

Arguably, the Fisk Jubilee Singers' early performances played a significant role in the academic study of Negro folk music. With the establishment of the American Folklore Society and the publication of *Journal of American Folklore* in 1888, Negro spirituals became central to the scholarly study of folklore in the U.S. In 1893, Hampton Institute's Folklore Society became a leader in this endeavor, advocating for black leadership in this field. They saw the study of folklore as a means of preserving the past of African Americans.¹¹⁵ The popularity of Negro spirituals continued to grow and HBCUs found that they could also profit from this fascination with folklore by publishing their own collections of Negro folk song. Graham suggests that these folk song collections reveal an interest in the performance context of Negro folk songs.¹¹⁶ The focus of Negro folk music in the early years of the academic study of folklore in America established Negro folk music as "America's true folk music."¹¹⁷

University Jubilee groups like the Fisk and Hampton Jubilee Singers continued to be well received by audiences for several decades. Even until the 1920s, the Jubilee groups received mostly rave reviews from critics who were astonished by the fact that Negroes could perform with classical training. However, there were always some reviews that criticized the student groups for displaying their classical training, especially with the performance of Negro spirituals. To these critics, performing in a classical style could not possibly be natural for Negroes.¹¹⁸

Downes's criticism of the Fisk Choir's 1933 performance that this chapter opened with indicates that six decades after the Fisk Jubilee Singer's first performance, the authenticity of their

¹¹⁵ Simon J. Bronner, *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 87-98.

¹¹⁶ Graham 26.

¹¹⁷ Graham 6; Cruz, 129-163, Epstein 241-331, Radano 172-173.

¹¹⁸ Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music 1878-1943* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 149, 155-156.

“elevated” style of performing Negro spirituals was still being questioned. It indicates that the debate over the definition of “authentic” Negro folk songs was always inextricably linked to how these songs were performed. Ideas on what constituted an “authentic” Negro spiritual were contested, some insisting that it should be performed in a manner that was far removed from Western classical training.

Nonetheless, without the early performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Negro spirituals would not have gained the popularity they achieved. They exposed more people to the songs and helped to establish it as a source of pride, rather than shame, for African Americans. This eventually led to Negro spirituals being considered American Folk music in the 1880s and 90s by Folklore societies. Because of the Fisk Jubilee Singer’s trailblazing work, the New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance were inspired to use Negro spirituals as a means of proving the significance of Negro folk culture to American culture at large. During the New Negro Renaissance, intellectuals like Hall Johnson continued to promote Negro spirituals as a source of pride for African Americans, emphasizing both the African and American roots of the songs. Groups like the Hall Johnson Choir sought to re-define how to perform Negro spirituals and work songs in a style that was both “authentic” and promoted racial uplift. Though the Fisk Choir was compared to the Hall Johnson Choir on the basis of the authenticity of their performance in the 1930s, it is important to keep in mind that the Hall Johnson Choir’s performance style would not be possible without the example set by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1860s and continued by the school’s performance groups in the 1930s.

Part II

The Importance of the Negro Spirituals to the Changing Definition of the New Negro (1890s-1920s)

The Negro spirituals found new meaning and prominence in shaping American national culture between post Reconstruction and World War I—one of the darkest periods in African American history. Between the end of the Reconstruction Era in 1877 and the early 20th century, most of the progress made in establishing civil rights for African Americans was reversed.¹¹⁹ The number of recorded lynchings peaked in the early 1880s and again around 1890, further establishing white supremacy.¹²⁰ Jim Crow laws were established beginning in 1876 and economic, educational, and social disadvantages were constantly enforced as a result.

During this period, three significant events took place that further established the Negro spiritual as a central characteristic of American national culture, building on the foundation the Fisk Jubilee singers laid. First, in 1893, Dvořák made his famous statement that an American school of composition would be formed when composers drew from American folk music—music of the soil. This folk music, he believed, came from the folk songs of African Americans, Native Americans, and other songs native to the country's people.¹²¹ Although this was a continuation of the work the Fisk Jubilee Singers began a few decades prior, the legitimization of an endorsement from a revered

¹¹⁹ The Hayes-Tilden compromise brought about the official end of the Reconstruction Era. Rutherford B. Hayes was a Republican running for the presidency, and Samuel J. Tilden was his Democrat opponent. They reached a compromise where Hayes would allow Democratic control of the remaining Southern states in exchange for Democrats allowing the certification of Hayes's election by Congress. Hayes won the presidency in 1876 and upheld the compromise. See Foner, 579-582.

¹²⁰ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 156.

¹²¹ "Antonin Dvořák on Negro Melodies," *New York Herald* (1893), "Dvořák's American School of Music," *New York Herald* (1893), "Dvořák on His New Work," *New York Herald* (1893). "Real Value of Negro Melodies," *New York Herald* (1893). All are quoted in Michael V. Pisaini, "The Indian Music Debate and 'American' Music in the Progressive Era," *College Music Symposium* 37 (1997): 76-78.

European composer propelled the Negro spirituals to the center of the debate on how to establish an emerging American national culture. Second, the renaissance of African American letters that scholars believe mark the beginning of the era of a New Negro that was both politically and culturally established began to emerge in the 1890s.¹²² As early as the first known published use of the phrase, the New Negro was a metaphor used to define blacks in opposition to negative stereotypes of blacks, or the Old Negro.¹²³ However, the specific definition of the New Negro was ever-evolving and varied amongst black authors and intellectuals. During post-Reconstruction to WWI, some defined the New Negro in almost solely political terms, while others leaned toward cultural definitions. By the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro as defined by Alain Locke was nearly a-political.¹²⁴ Third, using much of the same rhetoric as Dvořák and the New Negroes of the 1890s who were inspired by the European composer, Du Bois helped to define the role of Negro spirituals in shaping both American and African American culture with the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903.

The Negro Spiritual and Folk Nationalism

When Dvořák arrived in the United States, the search for—and definition of—American folk music was a hotly contested topic.¹²⁵ Jeanette Thurber (a wealthy entrepreneur and patron of the arts who founded the National Conservatory with the mission of training American composer)

¹²² Gates and Jarrett, 4-5. The phrase “New Negro” was published as early of 1745 in the London Magazine.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁵ Ibid. See also "National Conservatory of Music of America." *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev., *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e7155>.

invited the Czech composer, Antonín Dvořák, to be the head of the conservatory and to establish an American school of composition.¹²⁶ Dvořák, who was famous for his Czech nationalist compositions, applied a romantic nationalist ideology to compositional techniques for developing an American school of composition. This nationalist ideology was a belief that developed as early as the 1700s and flourished during the romantic period. It espoused the notion that folklore and folk culture “embodied the essential authentic wisdom” of a nation and that the folk were primitive people unspoiled by modern society.¹²⁷ Many artists who adhered to this romantic nationalist ideology collected folklore (especially folk music) and appropriated it in compositions. This is evident in the romantic nationalist works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Mikhail Glinka, Modest Mussorgsky, Bedřich Smetana, Béla Bartók, and Igor Stravinsky, to name a few examples.¹²⁸ All of these composers viewed the use of folk material in their works as establishing or representing a national culture based on folk material, which these composers believed to be “superior to those of contemporary civilization; or more generally... closest to truth.”¹²⁹

Dvořák’s promotion of the use of Negro folk music added to the popularity of the Negro spirituals from Jubilee groups and the high status American folklorists gave to Negro folk music. The importance Dvořák placed on Negro folk music as American folk music was not only inspirational for African Americans, but a powerful tool in the fight for civil rights. Dvořák gave further legitimacy and validity to the cultural past of African Americans, proving once again that

¹²⁶ Michael Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák: Searching in America for the Composer’s Inner Life* (New York: Norton, 2003), 3-4.

¹²⁷ Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/50846>.

¹²⁸ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music And Nationalism From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian traditions : A Biography of The Works Through Mavra* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996).

¹²⁹ Taruskin, “Nationalism.”

their usable past was indeed usable—not just for them but for America in general. In the 1893 Sunday edition of the New York Herald, an article titled “The Real Value of Negro Melodies” quoted Dvořák as saying,

In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will.... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source.¹³⁰

This was an incredibly controversial and revolutionary statement for an esteemed European classical composer to make during one of the darkest periods of African American history.

African American intellectual leaders such as Harry T Burleigh, WEB Du Bois, Alain Locke, and countless others frequently referred to Dvořák’s statement to give legitimacy to their folk culture.¹³¹ When quoting Dvořák’s claims on the usability of the Negro melodies in high-art compositions, these elite African Americans would often support it with the claim that Dvořák used the spiritual “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” in the second theme of the first movement of his Symphony No. 9 in E minor.¹³² This symphony, also known as *From the New World* (also known as the “New World Symphony”) was composed in 1893 to be an American symphony—an example for American composers who wished to write American works. However, as musicologist Jean Snyder points out, “direct quotation of folk melodies was not Dvořák’s method for creating a nationalist style—in either Bohemia or America.”¹³³ Though many scholars have argued that the

¹³⁰ Pisani, 76-78. In fact, Dvořák had at first suggested only the use of “the Negro melodies” in his New York Herald article of 21 May 1893 (which appeared within days of the completion of his symphony “From the New World”).

¹³¹ Gates and Jarrett 10.

¹³² Beckerman , 127. Vernon Jarrett, “Du Bois: Reflections on an Intellectual Giant On the 125th Anniversary of His Birth” *The Crisis* 100 (February 1993): 12-14, 22; 14. Jarrett recounts a gathering in 1948 where Du Bois explained what he believed to be the Negro spiritual influences in Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*.

¹³³ Jean Snyder, “A Great and Nobel School of Music: Dvořák, Harry T. Burleigh, and the African American Spiritual,” in *Dvořák in America 1892-1895* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1993), 123-148; 131.

Negro spiritual, “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” was actually thematic material in the first movement of Dvořák’s Symphony, the story that this was indeed true was repeated by African Americans to further support the legitimization of spirituals as material for high art music.¹³⁴ Burleigh himself also popularized another “legitimizing” anecdote: when he sang “Go Down Moses” for Dvořák, the composer exclaimed, “That is as good as a Beethoven Theme.”¹³⁵ This was considered the highest compliment that could be given to a folk song—let alone a Negro spiritual— further legitimizing African American folk culture as a source for African American high art.

During the 1890s, many of the African American intellectuals who used Dvořák’s statement to argue that African Americans had a respectable and usable cultural past were also contributing to newly emerging definitions of the New Negro. There were several definitions of the “New Negro” during this period, suggesting that there was a tension between political and artistic representations of a new racial self.¹³⁶ The artistic New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance that the remainder of this chapter is devoted to was somewhat similar to—but not the same as— the New Negro of the turn-of-the-century. When literature by African Americans on the definition of the New Negro began to emerge in the early-mid 1890s, the number of lynchings—almost exclusively of black people— had peaked. As a result, many of the self-identified New Negroes of this period defined themselves in political terms and were determined to demand civil rights and the protection of those rights by law. Their means of achieving this goal was through attaining education, etiquette, money, and property rights in the hopes of also gaining recognition and respect from those in power. It was imperative to these New Negroes to develop a race literature that established African American culture and

¹³⁴ Snyder, 132-3; Beckerman 130-135. Snyder and Beckerman discuss the debate over the extent to which Negro melodies influenced Dvořák’s composition.

¹³⁵ Charlotte W. Murray, “The Story of Harry T. Burleigh,” 104, quoted in Snyder, 131.

¹³⁶ Gates and Jarrett 6-7.

history, reserving a place for Negro culture alongside all of the other cultures of the world. This served the dual purpose of proving to whites that blacks have a significant culture and history, and developing a race consciousness by educating blacks of their own culture and history.¹³⁷

By adapting the romantic language used by Dvořák and the authors of *Slave Songs of the United States*, which helped to validate the status of Negro spirituals as a vital part of American folk culture, Du Bois furthered the cause of establishing Negro spirituals as music of the soil from a particular folk that defines the music of the U.S. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote,

...there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.¹³⁸

Du Bois also emphasized the hybridity of Negro spirituals and African American culture in general, frequently reminding the reader that they were both African and American. African American Studies scholar Paul Allen Anderson points out that by labeling Negro spirituals “slave songs,” Du Bois reveals a romantic-folklorist tendency to treat these songs as primitive folk material that survived the slave past, similar to the authors of *Slave Songs of the United States*—the title of which was deliberately chosen (significantly, it was not titled *Negro Spirituals of the United States*).¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Gates and Jarrett 12-13. In 1900, Booker T Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood published *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race*. This was an anthology of slave narratives, black histories, journalism, biographical sketches, and “extended defenses of the combat performances of black soldiers” in the American Revolution, Spanish-American War, and other battles in the Phillipines and Cuba. The goal of this book was to obliterate stereotypes of African Americans—as was the goal of all New Negroes who constructed this public image of the New Negro as pious abolitionists, patriotic soldiers, literate educators dedicated to uplifting the race.

¹³⁸ Du Bois, 11.

¹³⁹ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 33.

DuBois emphasized the African and American origins of a Negro folk culture that was Southern, rural and characterized by a vague and somewhat imagined African past and an overly romanticized slave past. He explains,

The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.¹⁴⁰

This invention of origins was repeated and took on a slightly different meaning during the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁴¹ Literary scholar Eric J Sundquist and musicologist Laurence Schenbeck assert that the incipit of Negro spirituals Du Bois included at the beginning of each chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* served the dual purpose of highlighting the song's African roots and the folk elements of performing spirituals. Though Du Bois used transcriptions from the published collections of Fisk and Hampton Universities, by not including the lyrics, Sundquist and Schenbeck believe that "the reader was thus forced to recall the sound of the spirituals in performance, and with that all the folk irregularity, the numberless different renditions, the fluid and spontaneous recomposition that performance entails."¹⁴² Additionally, these scholars assert that the absence of lyrics reminds readers that the true language of the slaves was not English.¹⁴³ Du Bois emphasized the African and

¹⁴⁰ Du Bois, 191.

¹⁴¹ "The Syncopated African: Constructions of Origins in the Harlem Renaissance (Literature, Music, Visual Arts)" in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Michael Feith, 51-72 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 51; Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 491-2. The phrase "Invention of origins" was coined by Michel Feith.

¹⁴² Schenbeck 75.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 75, Sundquist pp 493-494.

American origins of a Negro folk culture that was specifically Southern and rooted in slavery, helping to establish the definition of Negro folk culture that would be used by Harlem Renaissance intellectuals in the 1920s.¹⁴⁴ As an African American intellectual from the North, Du Bois's definition of folk culture had an elitist strain that fabricated a romantic image of lower-class Southern blacks. The importance of emphasizing the African origins of Negro folk culture was crucial to his idea of cultural nationalism. He underscored cultural pluralism using the Fisk Jubilee Singers as prime examples of how Negro spirituals that were both African and American, performed in the most "respectable" manner of their time, could promote racial uplift. Their performances demonstrated that the New Negro could use art to prove the cultural equality of Negro folk culture with that of whites, and subsequently lay stake to the claim that Negro folk culture was truly American. As Paul Allen Anderson states, "Formal training did not render black music inauthentic. Instead, the refinement of folk music materials could signal a concentration of the music's "soul" or expressive content and, thus, heightened power rather than dilution."¹⁴⁵

The Evolution of the New Negro from the Great Migration to 1925

Many historical events took place that yielded different interpretations of who the New Negro was. After the Great Migration, which began roughly around 1915 at the end of World War I, tensions grew within the black community between those who identified as New Negroes and their less-educated, Southern, rural counterparts. During the Great Migration, millions of African Americans moved from rural areas to cities in the South and in the North to take advantage of new industrial jobs and to escape the oppression of the Jim Crow South. Several settled in cities like New

¹⁴⁴ Schenbeck, 74; see also Baker 58, 66; Paul A. Anderson, 29.

¹⁴⁵ P. Anderson, 37.

York, and Chicago, creating two distinct socio and economic classes of blacks. Many Northern African Americans were prejudiced against the migrants who represented the “Old Negro” and sought to differentiate themselves from them—paving the way for classist definitions of the New Negro.¹⁴⁶ For those who identified as New Negroes, the spirituals still held an important place in asserting the legitimacy and importance of this cultural aspect of African American history. In this context, intellectuals like Du Bois believed these songs could remind Anglo-Americans that African Americans were producers of culture with a usable past that Europeans deemed worthy artistic material.¹⁴⁷

Political definitions of the New Negro became increasingly more prevalent during World War I when some African American leaders began to draw parallels between the imperialist war in Europe and the “racial war” being fought in their own country.¹⁴⁸ Failure to recognize the patriotic contributions of African American soldiers during WWI, and disgusted with fighting for a country that continued to systematically disenfranchise and do nothing to stop the lynchings by clansmen, leaders like Du Bois proclaimed that the New Negro was determined to return from the war to fight for Democracy in the United States. Political representation and action—not merely recognition—was now the battle cry of many New Negroes. As Gates and Jarrett explain, this post-war New Negro was a political warrior who fought against racism and capitalism, and was sympathetic to the goals of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

¹⁴⁶ Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁴⁷ Susan Platt, *Art And Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999), 8-9.

¹⁴⁸ Gates and Jarrett, 8.

The Russian, Georgian, and Uzbek Bolsheviks asserted that their brand of Communism would not only revolutionize their nation, but also the world.¹⁴⁹ New Negro figures such as Paul Robeson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and W.E. B. Du Bois and many others believed that if the Bolshevik system of Communism was replicated in America, it would lead to the end of racism and workers would be able to define their occupations on their own terms.¹⁵⁰ Black intellectuals often remarked on what they saw as similarities between the social and political oppression faced by Russian peasants and African Americans.¹⁵¹ This even prompted comparisons between Russian folk music and Negro spirituals (which I will discuss further later in this chapter).¹⁵² All of the prominent figures mentioned were in awe of Soviet Communism at some point between 1922 and 1963 and spent time in the Soviet Union, publishing their experiences.¹⁵³

Fanning the flames of the more militant New Negro was D.W Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*—a blatantly racist film that glorified the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan. An adaptation of the 1913 book *The Clansmen*, the film was wildly popular (*Birth of a Nation* was the first American blockbuster) and helped to support the second founding of the clan, which took place during the

¹⁴⁹ Katherine Anne Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 149.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Alain Locke, "The Negro Spirituals" in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 208-9.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 2. K. Baldwin chose these dates because it encompasses the meeting of the Third International in Moscow, the decline of Nikita Khrushchev's reign, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Death of Du Bois.

war.¹⁵⁴ In response to *The Birth of a Nation*, Du Bois produced *The Star of Ethiopia* for a second time (it was first performed in 1913) in order to combat the racist images in *The Birth of a Nation*.¹⁵⁵

The Star of Ethiopia is a pageant that dramatizes the evolution of black culture from Africa to the present. Du Bois's goal was to provide a comprehensive, dramatized history of black culture that traced the history of African Americans through prehistoric times, ancient Egypt, American slavery, abolition, and the Civil War. It was an enormous production that lasted three hours and required a cast of up to 1,000 actors.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, it was only performed four times: first in New York (1913), then in Washington DC (1915), Philadelphia, (1916), and the Hollywood Bowl (1925).¹⁵⁷ Du Bois was intentional about exhibiting how the highly popular show tunes of African American contemporary composers originated from the Negro spirituals. By including performances of every style of African American music in chronological order, he provided a history of African American musical "evolution," which he believed was intrinsic to the history of African Americans. There were Negro spirituals and Negro folk songs performed in a style Du Bois believed replicated that of slaves during the antebellum period. Current arrangements of Negro songs by Henry T. Burleigh and Nathaniel Dett were performed in the pageant. Original compositions by black composers made popular in Broadway shows, such as Will Marion Cook's "Swing Along" from *In Dahomey* and other show tunes by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and James Rosamond Johnson concluded *The Star of*

¹⁵⁴ Melvin Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁵⁵ Schenbeck, 83.

¹⁵⁶ Schenbeck, 84.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

Ethiopia.¹⁵⁸ Du Bois's cultural historical pageant was an artistic political response to the stereotypes and injustices that blacks endured during the interwar years.

The New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance

The tension between political and artistic representations of the New Negro began to heighten during the interwar years as the debate about what constituted the New Negro continued. For example, *The New York Age* published an open forum between January and March of 1920 titled “The New Negro—What is He? Does the New Negro Differ from the Negro of the Past?”¹⁵⁹ The New Negro Renaissance (otherwise known as the Harlem Renaissance) was underway, which re-defined the New Negro as an apolitical race of artists. A re-emphasis was placed on Negro folk culture in developing a New Negro cultural aesthetic that contributed to the greater American culture.

Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, a collection of essays authored by himself as well as several Harlem Renaissance leaders such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B DuBois, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, was published in 1935. A monumental achievement, this anthology was the first book with essays on black art, culture, and philosophy as well as chapters of fiction and poetry, to reach a large interracial audience. It was considered an instructional guide for how to become a New Negro of the 1920s.¹⁶⁰ Locke believed that “refashioning the public image of the old Negro”—the stereotypical Uncle Toms and Sambos (submissive and often illiterate)—into a New Negro who embraced their African heritage and Negro folk culture and produced highbrow

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 80-101. Provides full discussion on the Star of Ethiopia.

¹⁵⁹ Gates and Jarrett, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118.

literature and art, would prove to white supremacists that blacks were as capable as whites of producing artistic works. His goals for gaining the respect necessary to win civil rights was a decidedly non-political one. To this end, he deliberately edited and excluded essays from the *New Negro* that supported a more radical New Negro.¹⁶¹

In *The New Negro*, Alain Locke proclaimed that African American art and culture were undergoing a renaissance that he believed would promote a “cosmopolitan nationalism.” This brand of nationalism was similar to romantic culturalism that emphasized the importance of a distinctly rural, Southern, and African Negro folk culture to the contribution of American culture at large. However, “cosmopolitan nationalism” also stressed a nonassimilationist hybridization where Negro folk “flavor” is maintained in artistic and literary works but, through interracial cooperation (or a cultural exchange of sorts), is melded with aspects of European culture to create a new artistic form. The two conflicting aspects of Locke’s cosmopolitan nationalism— the preservation of cultural difference (via vague Africanisms and Negro folk culture) and interracial cooperation— formed what Locke himself dubbed the “key of paradox.” Yet, Locke strove to reconcile these opposing ideals.¹⁶²

Locke emphasized the right of African Americans to access and channel the primitivism of Ancient African art in order to construct a group identity of African Americans as a race of artists.¹⁶³ In an essay in *The New Negro* titled “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Locke stated,

¹⁶¹ Gates and Jarret, 9.

¹⁶² P. Anderson, 124, 134.

¹⁶³ P. Anderson, 122; Horace M. Kallen “Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 54, No. 5 (Feb 28, 1957): 119-127; Johnny Washington, *Alain Locke and Philosophy: A Quest for Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp 44-55; Rutledge M. Dennis, “Relativism and Pluralism in the Social Thought of Alain Locke,” in *Alain Locke Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982)29- 49.

... there would be little hope of an influence of African art upon the western African descendants if there were not at present a growing influence of African art upon European art in general. But led by these tendencies, there is the possibility that the sensitive artistic mind of the American Negro, stimulated by a cultural pride and interest, will receive from African art a profound and galvanizing influence. The legacy is there at least, with prospects of a rich yield. In the first place, there is in the mere knowledge of the skill and unique mastery of the arts of the ancestors the valuable and stimulating realization that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance.¹⁶⁴

He saw an opportunity for African American artists to capitalize on the allegedly inherent connection to African ancestors that African Americans possessed. Although he claimed that African Americans were disconnected from African artistic expression due to the Westernization and Christianization they underwent in America, he believed that their ancestral connection to Africa would give them an advantage over European artists who were inspired by African art.¹⁶⁵ Locke wanted artists to craft a New Negro identity that drew on essentialisms (in this case vague, symbolic Africanisms and the romanticized Negro folk culture) that were popular and acceptable to whites.

Part of Locke's drive to encourage artists to embrace their "primitive" African roots and incorporate Africanisms in their art was the French art dealer Paul Guillaume's endorsement of the primitive beauty of African art and the use of Africanisms in European art. Modernist art, he claimed, was deeply indebted to African art and because of this, Guillaume claimed, "the Negro cause will henceforth be an accepted thing."¹⁶⁶ European artists who were inspired by Africanisms, such as Pablo Picasso, developed art that blatantly drew from African art in order to challenge Western notions on what was deemed beautiful. To these artists, primitivism meant vitality—a

¹⁶⁴ Alain Leroy Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke, 271-277 (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925) 256-7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.; Lemke, 120-1.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Guillaume, "The Triumph of Ancient Negro Art," in *Opportunity* (May 1926): 147. Also quoted in Lemke, 121.

freedom from restrictions. Drawing from African art enabled them to de-center their subjects, explore the unconscious, and therefore challenge Western values. Europeans were also fascinated with American jazz and all-black musical revues (Josephine Baker's *La Revue Nègre* was an instant success in Paris in 1925), providing continuing inspiration for European avant-garde modernism that emphasized primitivism.¹⁶⁷

Jazz clubs in Harlem profited from white Americans' intrigue with black culture and catered to their fascination with primitive exoticism. Venues like the Cotton Club were decorated with bongo drums, African designs, and palm trees to complement its many jungle themed numbers that were intended to evoke a form of Africanism where several barely-clad "primitive" dancers performed jungle dances.¹⁶⁸ Also performed at venues such as the Cotton Club were the compositions of Duke Ellington who drew on European musical forms and cultivated a style that promoted pseudo-African "jungle" music. Among his many "primitivist" compositions created during his tenure as the band leader at the Cotton Club (1928-31) were "Jungle Jamboree," "Jungle Blues," and "Jungle Nights in Harlem."¹⁶⁹

Yet, Locke, and many of the African American artists who shared Locke's belief in the importance of drawing from African sources, created a symbolic and pieced-together African heritage that was not rooted in historical or anthropological research. Historian Michael Feith believes that Locke's encouragement to young Harlem Renaissance artists to "reclaim" primitive

¹⁶⁷ Lemke, 96-116.

¹⁶⁸ Lemke, 82-83; Lisa Barg, "National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance and Remembrance in American Music, 1927-1943," (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2001).

¹⁶⁹ Lemke, 83. Barg, 122-123; Martin Williams "Form Beyond Form" in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 404. Williams suggests that these "jungle" style compositions served the dual purpose of keeping white audiences happy while providing a means to explore and expand compositional techniques. Barg provides a discussion on the adaptability of Ellington's style to suit double social meanings (primitivist/jungle on one hand and hot jazz on the other).

characteristics of an imagined African heritage was not a rediscovery, but a deliberate creation of a racial identity.¹⁷⁰ Carefully crafted Negro culture was intended to prove that the New Negro could compete with the intellectual and artistic currents of early 20th century modernism through “a questioning of the Western tradition from a (rediscovered) African diasporic standpoint.”¹⁷¹

In order to create this identity that reclaimed the primitivisms popular in modernism, New Negro artists adapted and coopted stereotypical images. These ranged from strong black bodies unable to resist dancing to tom-toms in the jungle to aesthetic symbols that were more emblematic of an imagined pan-Africa. East African symbols from Egypt and West Africa comingled with those of West Africa in creating images that incorporated African icons such as Egyptian pharaohs and pyramids and emotional and sensuous jungle dancers. I posit, in agreement with Feith, that these characteristics that were often attached with negative stereotypes were not “reclaimed because of a rediscovery of an atavistic identity,” but, rather because black artists felt the need to create an identity that enabled them to compete with the intellectual and artistic currents of early 20th century modernism.¹⁷² Locke believed this idealistic art of the New Negro proved that African Americans were a race of artists who possessed the same level of reason, intelligence, and cultural refinement as elite Anglo Americans.

Reclaiming Negro Spirituals in 1925

Fisk, Hampton, and other university jubilee singing groups as well as professional jubilee groups were still performing Negro spirituals by the time Locke’s *New Negro* was published.

¹⁷⁰ Michel Feith, “The Syncopated African: Constructions of Origins in the Harlem Renaissance (Literature, Music, Visual Arts),” in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Fabre, G. & Feith, M. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 51-72; 61.

¹⁷¹ Feith, 66-67.

¹⁷² Ibid.

According to poet and musician James Weldon Johnson, when he and his brother J. Rosamund Johnson published their *Book of Negro Spirituals* (also in 1925), there was “hardly a choir among the largest and richest colored churches that does not make a specialty of singing the Spirituals.”¹⁷³ Despite the success of the professional jubilee groups, prior to 1925, many black churches had not permitted singing spirituals during worship services because it was viewed as too reminiscent of slavery.¹⁷⁴ However, in the introduction to his *Book of Negro Spirituals*, Johnson believed that a “reawakening” and changed attitude toward the spirituals around 1925 was

the main force in breaking down the immemorial stereotype that the Negro in America is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization; that he is here only to receive; to be shaped into something new and unquestionably better.¹⁷⁵

By attributing improved race relations to a broader acceptance of the Negro spiritual, Johnson promoted an extremely positive outlook on the state of the Negro in the mid-1920s. As a result, he seemed to ignore the atrocities that blacks faced during this time period, but such was the optimism of how the arts would change the opinions of people in power. In order to explain the socio-political transformative power of the Negro spiritual, Johnson provided his own version of the history of the effect of Negro spirituals on the American people, very similar to what has been outlined in this chapter. First, Negro spirituals were reported about and transcribed in travel journals; then the Fisk Jubilee Singers made the songs popular around the world; finally, composers began to arrange the songs so that the public could sing them in their homes and professional musicians could perform them in concerts. However, James Weldon Johnson made a few additional

¹⁷³ James Weldon Johnson, preface in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Including The Book of American Negro Spirituals and The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1925 and 1926; reprint New York: Viking Press, 1940), 18.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

observations to this historical narrative: the popularity of the spirituals when the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed them was “a popularity founded mainly on sentiment. The chief effect of this slave music upon its white hearers then was that they were touched and moved with deepest sympathy for the ‘poor Negro.’” Yet, Johnson believed that race relations were changing for the better. He asserted that as he was writing his introduction to the *Second Book of Negro Spirituals* a year later in 1926, the present vogue of the spirituals was due not to sympathy for the “poor Negro” but “admiration for the creative genius of the race.”¹⁷⁶ Similar to what he stated in the preface to the first *Book of Negro Spirituals*, he optimistically asserted that the Spirituals were responsible for reducing prejudice against blacks. In the preface to the first book, James Weldon Johnson lists all of the accomplishments of black classical musicians who soloed with major American symphonies to support his statement that “...this change of attitude with regard to the Negro which is taking place is directly related to the Negro’s change of attitude with regard to himself.”¹⁷⁷ He continued to explain, “This awakening to the truth that the Negro is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received; that he is the potential giver of larger and richer contributions, is, I think, due more to the present realization of the beauty and value of the Spirituals than to any other one cause.”¹⁷⁸

Johnson also commented on the zeal of New Negro artists to draw from the Negro spirituals as inspiration, exclaiming,

Almost suddenly the realization broke upon the Negro that in the Spirituals the race had produced one of the finest examples of folk-art in the world. The result was a leaping pride, coupled with a consciousness of innate racial talents and powers, that gave rise to a new school of Negro artists.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ James Weldon Johnson, preface in *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926), 17-18.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 19.

Seeking to place the folk music of African Americans in the same sphere as the African masks and sculptures that inspired European modernist artists, black musicians involved in the New Negro movement also sought to reclaim the primitivisms in Negro Spirituals. To this end, James Weldon Johnson wrote, “The musical genius of the African has not become so generally recognized as his genius in sculpture and design, and yet it has a wide influence on the music of the world.”¹⁸⁰ He then proceeds to explain the importance of their African as well as white American origins. There was a need to reclaim the spirituals as truly Negro in derivation as the origins of the spirituals came under attack by critics who believed that spirituals were merely the imitation of hymns sung by white Americans. By erasing their African origins, the nay-sayers could effectively discredit the widely acclaimed authentic primitiveness of the spirituals that was so important for constructing a Negro Folk that could be used in New Negro art.

As DuBois did several years prior in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Johnson emphasized the hybridity of the origins of the spirituals in both introductions of the *Book of Negro Spirituals*. He attributed the hybrid character of the spirituals to a fusion of European and African characteristics. Johnson provided a very common, if essentialist and simplistic, explanation of the nature of the hybrid Negro spiritual by stating,

Generally speaking, the European concept of music is melody and the African concept is rhythm. Melody has, relatively small place in African music, and harmony still less: but in rhythms African music is beyond comparison with any other music in the world.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Johnson referred to *Afro-American Folksongs: a Study in Racial and National Music*, a book-length study published in 1914 by music critic Henry Krehbiel and quotes him at length.¹⁸² As a highly esteemed American music critic of European descent, Johnson used Krehbiel's study as legitimizing proof that Negro spirituals were not simple imitations of Anglo-American hymns. In this introduction, Johnson continued to provide examples, based on Krehbiel's work, of the similarities between the rhythms and intervallic structure in spirituals and those in African songs, emphasizing the superiority, or "advanced," nature of spirituals because of their European-inspired harmonies and melodies.¹⁸³

Black intellectuals and musicians tackled the argument of whether Negro spirituals were the unique contribution of African American slaves and not mere imitations of Anglo hymns, publishing essays and informative program notes in the hopes of educating the public and maintaining the status of the Negro spiritual as true American folk music that was both African and American. For example, a few years before James Weldon Johnson published his essays on the Negro spiritual in the *Book of Negro Spirituals*, John W. Work III, composer, ethnomusicologist, music educator, graduate of Fisk University, and director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1947 to 1956 also took on this argument. In an essay published in *Opportunity* in 1923, he aimed to prove that Negro Spirituals are not mere imitations of the songs of Anglo-Americans and that they are worthy of forming the basis of a national school of composition. To support his argument, Work listed several white composers and their works, which used African-American folk songs in their compositions. Work

¹⁸² Ibid. Joseph Horowitz. "Krehbiel, Henry." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15502>.

¹⁸³ Johnson, 18-19. Henry Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (Portland, ME: Longwood Press, 1914; reprint 1976), 19, 13-15.

also examined the nature of the folk song and interpreted meanings of several spirituals in order to prove their authenticity.¹⁸⁴

Maintaining the “folk quality” of Negro Spirituals in performances by New Negro musicians

As we have seen from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Negro spirituals were essential to constructing the evolving identity of the New Negro. Even Locke employed the language of romantic nationalism when discussing the importance of Negro Spirituals to the construction of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance. Locke also uses the word “soil” explaining that the folk birthed this American national music from the soil. However, Locke adds to this language the term “race genius,” stating, “The spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America. But the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them.”¹⁸⁵ However, Locke criticized the lack of folk quality in high art arrangements of Negro spirituals.¹⁸⁶ In a chapter in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* appropriately titled “The Negro Spirituals” Locke disapproved of the solo arrangements of spirituals by African American classical composers such as Harry T Burleigh. What was missing in these arrangements was what he deemed the “folk quality” of the spirituals, especially the congregational, choral element.¹⁸⁷ Noting that composers like Nathaniel Dett, Edward Boatner, and Hall Johnson, among others, were beginning

¹⁸⁴ John W. Work, “Negro Folk Song,” in *The Opportunity Reader*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Random House, 1999), 336-342.

¹⁸⁵ Locke, “The Negro Spirituals,” in *The New Negro*, 199.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. See also Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 22-24.

¹⁸⁷ Alain Locke, “The Negro Spirituals” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 208.

to move away from solo arrangements and explore the choral form, he posited that composers should use the spirituals as material for modern compositions similar to modern Russian folk music. He believed that after the preservation of the folk elements was achieved "...their next development will undoubtedly be, like that of the modern Russian folk music, their use in the larger choral forms of the symphonic choir, through which they will reachieve their folk atmosphere and epic spirituality."¹⁸⁸ Drawing similarities between Negro folk music and Russian folk music was another way in which the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance drew parallels between the oppressed Russian underclass and African Americans, but in a way that centralized music and culture rather than radical political views.

Similar to Locke, James Weldon Johnson also believed that Negro spirituals were meant for choral singing. In order to emphasize the primitiveness of the spirituals and further make his case for their use as a basis of classical composition, he lists several binaries. "They lack the grand style, but never the sublime effect. Their words are colloquial, but their mood is epic. They are primitive, but their emotional artistry is perfect..."¹⁸⁹ These comparisons emphasize what Locke considered to be the primitive characteristic of the spirituals in the most positive light. He also warns against "sophisticated over-elaboration" of European art songs.¹⁹⁰

Although Locke, like James Weldon Johnson, favored choral arrangements of Negro spirituals, he was careful to note that Negro folk music had many styles and solo arrangements. He believed that as long as they were rendered in a style that was genuine, these solo arrangements could also maintain a folk flavor. Both Locke and J.W. Johnson used Paul Robeson (a baritone,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 202, 208-9.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 201.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 207-208.

famous for singing Negro spirituals and other Negro folk songs in a manner that was considered folksy and authentic) and Roland Hayes (a tenor who sang Negro spirituals alongside classical art songs by European composers in performances in an operatic style) as examples of how the folk could have many styles.

To realize this, one has only to compare the robust and dramatic rendering of the Negro baritone Paul Robeson with the subdued, ecstatic and mystic renderings of Roland Hayes. Both are great interpretations; and each typical of a vein of Negro singing. As long as the peculiar quality of Negro song is maintained and the musical idiom kept pure, there can be no valid criticism. Complaint cannot legitimately be made against the concert use and the art development of the spirituals, but only against the glossed-over versions characteristic of those arrangers and singers who have not closely studied the primitive Negro folk-ways of singing.¹⁹¹

Part III

The Hall Johnson Choir:

Creating an image of Authenticity and Singing the Ideals of the New Negro

In 1925 Johnson quit his orchestral job as a pit musician for the touring cast of *Shuffle Along*. According to Eugene Simpson (Hall Johnson's biographer), his resignation was the result of being disturbed by the lack of authenticity in the performances of the Harmony Kings (a regular act in the musical revue who performed Negro spirituals and folk songs).¹⁹² What, exactly, was not authentic about the Harmony Kings' performance is not clear and it is possible that Johnson felt that his own claim to authentic performances of Negro spirituals needed to be protected so that he could establish and maintain his role as the authentic purveyor of Negro folk music. Another account

¹⁹¹ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 23; James Weldon Johnson preface to *The (first) Book of Negro Spirituals*, 37.

¹⁹² Simpson, 4.

published in *The Pittsburg Courier* claims that after hearing the Harmony Kings perform, he saw “how the public loved the singing of Negro folk songs.”¹⁹³ It is very likely that Johnson saw both an opportunity to create an “authentic Negro choir” that catered to the public’s desire for Negro folk songs, and the chance to contribute to the effort of New Negro artists and intellectuals to promote Negro folk culture for racial uplift.

Johnson wrote essays and was a guest host on radio programs, educating audiences about the Negro Spiritual. One of his most well-known essays is titled, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” and was published in 1965. Although written forty years after *The New Negro* was published, this essay echoed those of Locke’s in *The New Negro* and his chapter on the spirituals in Locke’s 1936 book, *The Negro and His Music*. Johnson states that his purpose in forming the Hall Johnson Choir was to

show how the American Negro slaves—in 250 years of constant practice, self-developed under pressure but equipped with their inborn sense of rhythm and drama (plus their new religion)—created, propagated and illuminated an art-form which was, and still is, unique in the world of music... Also, their musical style of performance was very special. It cannot be accurately notated but must be studied by imitation.”¹⁹⁴

Johnson made similar claims as James Weldon Johnson in his introductions for *The Book of Negro Spirituals*. Like Locke and James Weldon Johnson, Hall Johnson emphasized the importance of preserving the choral aspect of Negro spirituals, lamenting the increasing interest in solo performances of these songs, as well as the lack of recordings of what he believed to be the “true spiritual.”¹⁹⁵ Using language similar to Locke, Johnson claims that the lack of recordings was a tragedy because published arrangements could not portray their style of performance because of the

¹⁹³ Floyd J. Calvin, “Hall Johnson Has Made Spirituals Famous,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1931, B8.

¹⁹⁴ Hall Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 268-275; see p. 272.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

non-transcribable elements such as bent notes, rhythmic improvisation, and “the unconscious, but amazing and bewildering counterpoint produced by so many voices in individual improvisation.”¹⁹⁶

Johnson stated, “The racial tendency to improvise ‘between-notes’ [and] the great variety of characteristic tone-color and rhythmic accent—all of these Negro techniques simply defy notation in any known system. They must be recorded from the living sound.”¹⁹⁷

Hall Johnson echoes one of the most important ideas that Locke championed throughout the Harlem Renaissance as one of the primary means black composers could achieve racial uplift: that of using the spirituals as a basis of modern, classical music compositions. As we have already seen, Locke was convinced that the setting of symphonic, choral arrangements of spirituals in modern, classical compositions would equal and surpass that of Russian folk and choral-based compositions.¹⁹⁸ Likewise, Johnson believed that a program note along with “the plain folk melody unadorned” (a transcription of the melody) should accompany the ideal recording of the spirituals, even in 1965—long after the Harlem Renaissance. Continuing his classical form metaphor where the “plain folk melody unadorned” is the theme, Johnson explains that there should be “a development-section, along racial lines, showing future possibilities for composition. Such a record-library would not only rescue the grandest American art-form from oblivion, [but] would immeasurably heighten the artistic stature of the United States among the other civilized nations.”¹⁹⁹

Although Johnson does not quote Locke directly, his 1965 essay clearly echoes the “key of paradox” and the cultural racialism essential to Locke’s ideal of cosmopolitan nationalism. Hall

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 271-2.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 272.

¹⁹⁸ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 21.

¹⁹⁹ Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” 280.

Johnson (like James Weldon Johnson and John Work III) goes to great lengths to describe and legitimize racial essentialism and primitivism in Negro spirituals to prove that these primitivisms are truly the basis of high art. He carefully constructs an image of African American musical culture by highlighting primitivisms—especially African American’s innate gift of rhythm and use of drums—using essentialist language to explain the history of African American music. His version of the history of the Negro spiritual emphasizes the primitive African roots of the spirituals and the merging of European harmony. Tracing the history of the spirituals back to African drums, he states, “The musical instruments of the primitive African tribes were crude and undeveloped so that the songs were dependent on the voices of the singers. Only the drum, in manufacture and performance, left nothing to be desired” (See Appendix).²⁰⁰ Johnson often highlighted the primitive elements of Negro folk music, but not without also extolling the dignified lineage of African American slaves and their music. In a 1954 lecture demonstration on the origins of the Negro spiritual, he takes time to point out that some of the early African slaves who were brought to America were kings, chieftains, and soldiers in their home country whose previous stature translated to moral courage curiosity and imagination that could not be harmed by the harsh conditions of slavery.²⁰¹ Then, according to Johnson’s history, the English introduced harmony and melody to the African slaves who combined it with their instinctive rhythmic talent. Just as Johnson strategically constructed an image of African American musical culture, he also carefully promoted the idea that the merging of European and African musical traditions was and is the basis of American music. The result, he

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 269; Johnson, “Lecture-Demonstration on the Origins of the Negro Spiritual,” March 21, 1954, reprinted in Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music*, 250; Johnson, “Some Distinctive Elements in African- American Music,” reprinted in Simpson, 229-30. Simpson surmises that “Some Distinctive Elements” were notes for a weekly radio show that featured the Hall Johnson Choir on Sunday afternoons on WMCA, New York’s Christian radio station. The date is assumed to be July 1944.

²⁰¹ Johnson, “Lecture-Demonstration on the Origins of the Negro Spiritual,” 252.

explains, was Afro-American music, which was “a combination of syncopation, the pentatonic scale, unison singing, and a combination of part singing, plus the poetry of the lyrics that grew out of the culture of the nation.”²⁰² This definition of the musical characteristics of Afro-American music came from a radio program Johnson hosted for WMCA in 1944 in which he provided a musicological lesson on various types of Negro folk songs such as spirituals, work songs, and more contemporary works like the songs for the movie “Cabin in the Sky.” In this show, he demonstrated aspects of Negro folk song by playing recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir, Marian Anderson, and even of Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” to demonstrate how composers have used pentatonic scale and syncopations.²⁰³

Like James Weldon Johnson, Hall Johnson also felt the need to provide a counter-argument to the claim that Negro spirituals were merely imitations of white American hymns, and refers to the originators of the Negro folk song as “slave-composers.” By elevating them to the level of composer, Hall Johnson is combating the argument that slaves merely imitated music they heard without contributing musically to the creation of a new genre of American folk song: Negro folk song.²⁰⁴ Like most black intellectuals who wrote about spirituals, Johnson emphasizes the hybrid nature of the songs, proving that they are both derivatives of Anglo American hymns and the unique creation of black slaves explaining,

Those who love to call attention to the fact that certain famous Negro spirituals are undoubtedly based upon certain Southern Methodist hymns, far from belittling the Negro’s gift for originality, are only paying a compliment to his great natural musicianship and his superior natural taste.”²⁰⁵

²⁰² Johnson, “Some Distinctive Elements in African-American Music,” 230.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Johnson, “Some Aspects of the Negro Folk Song,” n.d., reprinted in Simpson, 226.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

In several of his essays on Negro folk songs and spirituals, Johnson claims that the lifestyle of slaves both compelled and allowed them to create spirituals because “their daily toil engaged the muscles only and left the mind free to make what beauty it could out of a physically circumscribed existence.”²⁰⁶ These, he claims, were ideal circumstances for creating Negro folk song for “They certainly had plenty to sing about and they were denied every other means of expression except singing.”²⁰⁷

According to Hall Johnson, where white Americans were too busy building a nation to have time for creating music, African American slaves had the time while doing manual labor, as well as the pressing need, for self-expression due to their circumstances.²⁰⁸ Their singing was also encouraged by the slave masters, as they noticed that it made them work more efficiently, and therefore, slaves had the opportunity to practice and refine their art of folk singing. Johnson explains that the slaves eventually accepted the master’s religion and was incorporated into every aspect of their lives because it provided the hope of freedom for the otherwise oppressive and inhumane condition of slaves in America, concluding “Sometimes a fetid swamp produces a rarely complicated and strangely beautiful flower.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Johnson, “Some Distinctive Elements of African American Music,” Simpson, 233.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, “Folk Songs of the United States of America—Part I,” n.d. reprinted in Simpson, 238.; “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” in Southern, 269; “Some Aspects of the Negro Folk Song,” 226; “Lecture-Demonstration on the Origins of the Negro Spiritual,” 249-50. Simpson states that “Folk Songs of the United States” was the first part of a two-part program on American folk song for the international radio broadcast program titled “Voice of America.”

²⁰⁹ Johnson, “Some Distinctive Elements in African-American Music,” 233.

“Like an Old-Fashioned Negro Camp Meeting”: The Marketing and Reception of The Hall Johnson Choir



Figure 1.1: Promotional brochure published by Victor Records.²¹⁰

As is shown in this cover of a promotional brochure for the Hall Johnson Negro Choir, the group was marketed with images and slogans that appealed to white audiences' perceived ideas of African American musical performance and their fascination with black religious expression. At the

²¹⁰ “Hall Johnson Negro Choir,” promotional brochure, published by Victor Records, March 17, [1928?], Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections--Music Division, The New York Public Library.

same time, this cover, particularly the logo, also depicts a deliberate, artistic reversal of negative stereotypes that embodied the New Negro ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. The logo, which was displayed on all of the press releases and programs for the choir from approximately 1928-1931, is an angular silhouette of a man sitting in a relaxed, reclined position playing the banjo surrounded by an art deco design. A symbol made popular in 19th-century blackface minstrelsy, the illustration of a man playing a banjo, is an interesting choice for the logo since the Hall Johnson Choir was famous for singing a Capella.²¹¹ Black men playing the banjo without a care in the world depicted the romantic idealism of the “Old South.” Minstrel lyrics often portrayed blacks as content with being enslaved and devoted to their master. The lyrics for Stephen Foster’s, “Ring de Banjo!” is one such example:

De darkey hab no troubles
While he's got dis song to sing.
De beauties ob creation
Will nebber lose der harm
While I roam de old plantation
Wid my true lub on my arm.

Once I was so lucky,
My massa set me free,
I went to old Kentucky
To see what I could see;
I could not go no farder,
I turn to massa's door,
I lub him all de harder,
I'll go away no more.²¹²

²¹¹ Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” 277.

²¹² Stephen Foster, “Ring de Banjo!” *Stephen Foster Song Book: Original Sheet Music of 40 Songs* (New York: Dover, 1974), 110-113.

Yet, the Hall Johnson Choir logo is rendered in a modernist style typical of Aaron Douglas, the most prolific African American artist who created illustrations for almost every major literary work of the Harlem Renaissance.²¹³ Defined by one of Douglas's contemporaries as "Afro-Deco," his style fused simplified forms, geometric shapes, Egyptian pyramids, skyscrapers, images of the jungle, African masks and sculpture—It was "Neither exclusively African or Art Deco, but both" [See examples 2.1 - 4.1 below]²¹⁴



Figure 2.1: Aaron Douglas, "Weary As I Can Be" illustration for "Lonesome Place" by Langston Hughes.²¹⁵

²¹³ Caroline Goeser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 17-56. Although other artists whose style was similar to Douglass's, such as Rosco Wright or James Lesense Wells could have illustrated the Hall Johnson Choir logo, Douglass originally established this style. He began illustrating in 1925 for *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Messenger*, *The New Negro*, *Ebony* and *Topaz*, *Fire!!* and *Harlem*. He also created many dust jacket designs for famous black authors of the Harlem Renaissance such as James Weldon Johnson. His illustrations in Johnson's book, *God's Trombones*, is considered his best illustrative work.

²¹⁴ Goeser, 18.

²¹⁵ Aaron Douglass, "Weary As I Can Be," *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life*, 4 (October, 1926): 314-315.



Figure 3.1: Cover of *Fire!!*²¹⁶



Figure 4.1: Possibly Aaron Douglas?²¹⁷

Accompanying this primitivist/modernist logo is the slogan “Like an old-fashioned Negro camp meeting,” advertising the Hall Johnson concerts as an experience that was similar to evangelical revival meetings that featured emotional displays of worship.²¹⁸ Because the Hall Johnson Choir was advertised as performing the music and the frenzy of church revivals, it attracted white audiences who sought Negro entertainment that was primitive and sensational. Even a white critic reviewing a Hall Johnson Choir concert observed that Negro singing is usually directed to white listeners.²¹⁹ The logo featuring a banjo player in an “Afro Deco” illustration and the slogan used to

²¹⁶ Aaron Douglass, cover illustration, *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to The Younger Negro Artists*, 1, no.1 (November, 1926).

²¹⁷ Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

²¹⁸ Cruz, 81-83.

²¹⁹ *Boston Evening Transcript* (Feb 18, 1929), n.p. Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library. The journalist explained that aside from the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Bostonians have not had the privilege of hearing Negro spirituals sung by a large ensemble, and “the consequent impression, as it seemed to a white listener—to whom in these days negro-singing is usually directed—was far more vivid, pungent and racial.”

market the group were expressly designed to manipulate romanticized perceptions of primitiveness in Negro folk culture in order to appeal to a white audience.

Promoting “Authenticity” in Hall Johnson Choir Publicity Literature

The promotional materials for the Hall Johnson Choir used between 1928 and 1931 (rough estimates) featured quotes from newspaper reviews published by the white press of Hall Johnson Choir performances. Many of these quotes used for publicity purposes highlighted racial essentialisms as confirmation of the choir’s authenticity. More than one of these reviews quoted Hall Johnson’s statement on his philosophy of performing spirituals: “beyond an adequate clarity of diction and a fair precision of attack, no attempt is made to secure a perfect choral ensemble as generally accepted. We believe that this enables us to preserve an emotional content that would be lost by a greater refinement of method.”²²⁰ Music critic W.J. Henderson, also included this quote and prefaced it by stating that though Johnson was highly educated he believed that Negro song was “in danger of too much sophistication through its artificial practice by the white man.”²²¹ Henderson seemed to assume that educated African Americans would usually compose highbrow arrangements of spirituals, such as those by Harry T. Burleigh or Nathaniel Dett. This journalist also pointed out that the choir’s intonation “possesses just that shade of inaccuracy that adds a pungency to the group singing of colored folk” and that their rhythm, however, was “snappy” and “precise.”²²² Along the same vein, A *New York Herald Tribune* article included in the press release for Hall Johnson

²²⁰ This quote is used by other reviewers like the author of “Hall Johnson Ensemble Pleases Jordan Hall Audience,” *Boston Sunday Post* (February 17, 1929).

²²¹ W. J. Henderson “Negro Choir at Pythian Temple: Hall Johnson’s New Organization Presents Varied Program at Concert,” newspaper clipping, *New York Sun*, March 1 [1928?], Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

²²² Ibid.

Choir concerts highlights the perceived racial difference between white and black singing styles and describes the solo of Mrs. Wille Mays, a contralto, as “a primitive tribal, wailing note foreign and stimulation to Gotham-hardened ears.”²²³ A reviewer for the *New York Times* also remarked on their “phenomenal sense of rhythm” and described the choir as “an ensemble most perfectly suited to the reproduction of the old camp meeting fervor and emotion.”²²⁴ Yet another reviewer commented on the racial characteristics that made the choir’s performance an authentic and religiously intense experience, saying “The religious intensity inherent in the race gave an elemental power to the spirituals such as white imitators attempt in vain to encompass.” Coupled with the choir’s “natural, irresistible knack for humor,” the performance was enjoyable.²²⁵ A quote from W.J. Henderson, who was described in the promotional pamphlet as “Dean of the New York critics,” was featured at the top of the page. He stated:

Mr. Johnson’s choir has been taught to sing the songs of its people as Negroes sing them when they do it spontaneously. There is ebullient energy ... These colored brothers and sisters let loose their voices with few reservations and with revelations of deep personal interest.

In addition to praising the choir’s innate religious sensibility, racial sense of rhythm, and natural inclination to humor, the press releases, advertisements and other promotional materials also featured pull-quotes from reviews that describe the choir as a highbrow ensemble. Some of these reviews included both types of descriptors (primitive and highbrow), highlighting the complexities of the “key of paradox” manifested in the choir’s performance and presentation. As we saw in a

²²³ Press release for Hall Johnson Choir concert, n.d., Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

press release quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the Hall Johnson Choir is described as a polished, professional group that is not made up of “coon shouters” or “jubilee singers.”²²⁶

Another press release includes quotes from famous classical musicians: Maurice Ravel, Walter Damrosch and Eugene Goossens, validating the Hall Johnson Choir as a legitimate, highbrow ensemble. Reportedly, Maurice Ravel was “Charmed... by the beauty of the voices and the musicianship of these artists.” Damrosch said, “They sing with fine precision, beautiful tone quality, and above all, with a deep inner emotion which fairly sweeps the listeners along.” Goossens exclaimed that the singing was excellent and Johnson “certainly knew how to procure his effects, and whose style of conducting was in itself extremely interesting.”²²⁷

In the promotional material used for the Choir’s publicity, the authenticity of the group is emphasized in both the choir personnel as well as their singing style, which was described as “genuine” and “southern:”

The Hall Johnson Negro Choir is composed of genuine down-South Negroes, led by a conductor born and brought up in the center of Georgia, twenty miles from a railroad and where his grandmother, a former slave, taught him to sing the melodies of her childhood.²²⁸

Johnson’s Authenticity Narrative

Johnson himself promoted this authenticity narrative, claiming to have a direct connection to the religious lives of the types of African Americans he depicted, often recounting stories of hearing his grandmother, a former slave, sing spirituals. For example, in the aforementioned 1944

²²⁶ Newspaper clipping possibly from *The Musical Digest*, May, 1928, Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

²²⁷ Press release, n.d.

²²⁸ Promotional brochure, p. 1, n.d. Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

radio program on “Some Distinctive Elements in African-American Music,” Johnson painted a poignant, nostalgic picture of his grandmother and the inspiration she gave him

To say anything really significant about the beginnings of the Hall Johnson Choir without mentioning my maternal grandmother would be like telling the story of Christopher Columbus with Queen Isabella left out. For like the historic jewels, which became more than just costly trifles for the decoration of royalty, the grand old Negro songs and stories of my grandmother, garnered during the last thirty years of slavery, were not only the delight of my youth but turned out to be the richest treasure of my later years.²²⁹

He then recounts that as a child, he would watch his grandmother singing spirituals while doing housework in her kitchen. During these sacred times, she would be so overcome with emotion and worship that she would work herself into a shout, which he described as “getting happy.” She ended her solo worship services with a prayer before continuing with her kitchen duties.²³⁰ Johnson claimed that witnessing his grandmother sing spirituals, in addition to the stories she told him about her life as a slave, provided sufficient personal experience with how spirituals were authentically sung. If we take Johnson’s story at face value (and there is no need to doubt that he was embellishing the truth) then even these one-on-one lessons in spirituals and the life of slaves was limited. This is especially true for someone who sought to re-create the authentic, communal singing of Negro spirituals and other Negro folk songs. Certainly, these special moments with his grandmother made a deep impression on the young Johnson, but the majority of his life was very detached from that of his grandmother’s life as a slave and of the rural, southern folk he depicted in his choir’s performances.

²²⁹ Johnson, “Some Distinctive Elements in African-American Music,” 231.

²³⁰ Ibid., 232. See also “Hall Johnson Offers True Folk Melodies in Pictures,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Jan 9, 1937, 8.

Johnson's family was part of the African American Southern elite. His father, William Decker Johnson was born a free man on March 19, 1842 in Calvert County, Maryland.²³¹ He was an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church, the first independent all-black denomination founded in 1791 by the Reverend Richard Allen in order for black Methodists to worship free of the racism they experienced in church. Highly educated, William Decker Johnson held a doctorate in divinity degree from Lincoln University in Maryland.²³² His mother was born a slave in 1857, but was able to obtain an education. She attended the elite Atlanta University, an all-black college where the majority of the student body was made up of students from well-to-do black families.²³³ According to historian Willard B. Gatewood's definition of the socially elite class of blacks that he terms "aristocrats of color," Johnson came from a family that was considered to be part of this class. Aristocrats of color were blacks that were born free (or were favored slaves) and were well educated and accomplished.²³⁴ With its concentration of highly esteemed black colleges, by the 1890s, Atlanta was also a mecca for culture and learning among blacks—its only competitor was Nashville. As one Atlanta resident claimed, "Atlanta has more eminently cultured Negroes than any city in the union."²³⁵ Educators received a great deal of social prestige in these communities as it was

²³¹ Simpson, 1.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 90-92; James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933) pp. 75-76, quoted in Gatewood, 92. Gatewood explains, "The upper class in Atlanta, including many who were non-natives traced its origins primarily to the 'house-servant group' of mixed ancestry....The popular image of Atlanta University and Spelman College, in particular, was that they catered to upper-class blacks." According to James Weldon Johnson, who attended Atlanta University in the 1890s, the majority of the women students at least were from "the best-to-do colored families of Georgia and the surrounding states."

²³⁴ Gatewood, 69-95.

²³⁵ *Indianapolis Freeman*, February 20, 1897, quoted in Gatewood, 92.

believed that education was inextricably linked to respectability and genteel comportment.²³⁶ The Johnson family must have been highly esteemed as William Decker Johnson was the commissioner of education and the presiding elder of the Marietta and Griffin Districts of Georgia in 1904. He then became the president of Allen University in South Carolina—a school that was established in 1871 by the Right Reverend John Mifflin Brown and the assembled clergy of the Columbia District of the AME Church. The University was established to educate newly freed slaves and to “ensure a well-trained clergy for the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”²³⁷ It was to be the “First institution of learning consecrated to Negro self-activity and Negro manhood” in the state of South Carolina.²³⁸

Hall Johnson was born in Athens, Georgia on March 12, 1888. When he attended church, it is very likely that the music he sang and the worship style he experienced was the polar opposite of a revival or “camp meeting style” worship service. The founder of the AME denomination, Reverend Allen, had been in favor of the kind of emotional expression in worship that was prevalent in Methodist camp meetings during the Great Awakening. However, Bishop Alexander Payne (who served as the sixth bishop of the AME church from 1852-1893) sought to put an end to what he thought were ignorant, unrefined worship practices. Payne detested the “shouting” prevalent in churches of freedmen and by the late nineteenth century, his mission to establish educated, refined worship style in the AME church was largely successful.²³⁹ Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, the first southern bishop of the AME church (elected in 1880) actually brought back popular singing and

²³⁶ Ibid., 247-8.

²³⁷ Allen University website, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.allenuniversity.edu/about-us/allens-legacy/#sthash.ldH2eNmi.dpuf>.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Paul Harvey, “‘These Untutored Masses’: The Campaign for Respectability among White and Black Evangelicals in the American South”, in *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and Culture*, ed. Walter Conser Jr. and Rodger Payne (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 249-271; 263.

revival songs, reintroducing Methodist gospel hymns, but he, too, was not in favor of spirituals which he felt were unrefined. He described them as “devoid of both sense and reason... some are absolutely false and vulgar.”²⁴⁰ Even the AME hymnals that underwent a few revisions relied heavily on Methodist and traditional Protestant hymns with no inclusion of Negro spirituals.²⁴¹

With support, instruction, and encouragement from his family, Hall Johnson began his musical studies on the piano while in elementary school. At the age of fifteen, he taught himself to play the violin and also enrolled as a freshman at Atlanta University. After his father received the position of president of Allen University in South Carolina, he transferred there and graduated with a bachelor degree in 1908. He then attended the University of Pennsylvania for graduate studies in music theory and composition and studied violin with Frederick Hahn, a former member of the Boston Symphony. In 1910, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with the Simon Haessler Prize for the best composition for orchestra and chorus.²⁴² He married his college friend, Polly Celeste Copenig in 1912 and they eventually settled in Harlem in 1914 where they frequented social circles of Harlem Renaissance thinkers. Johnson earned a living teaching theory, composition, and violin in his personal studio in Harlem, as well as playing in several orchestras. During the height of the dance craze, he played in the dance orchestra for the Ziegfeld club Jardin de Danse on Broadway—a public ballroom where “fashionables” gathered to dance and socialize. Jardin de Danse was also a place where people could learn the latest dance crazes in classes offered at the ballroom and enjoy vaudeville and cabaret entertainment provided on alternate nights.²⁴³ Johnson

²⁴⁰ Harvey, 265.

²⁴¹ Jon Michael Spencer, *Black Hymnody: A Hymnological History of The African-American Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 3-24.

²⁴² Simpson, 2-3.

²⁴³ “The New Jardin de Danse,” *Player*, June 27, 1913.

was also a member of James Reese Europe's Clef Club Orchestra, and in 1914 he played in Europe's eleven-piece dance orchestra for Vernon and Irene Castle's dance salon, The Castle House (popularly known as "Castles-in-the-Air"), where the fox trot and turkey trot were made popular.²⁴⁴ In addition to the aforementioned orchestral gigs, Johnson was a pit musician for the all-black-cast and all-black creative team production of Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's groundbreaking musical *Shuffle Along* (1921). According to musicologist Eileen Southern, this show "brought a 'different' kind of musical to Broadway, a Harlem folk show in which no concessions were made to white taste or to theater clichés."²⁴⁵ In 1923, Johnson was a musician in the orchestra for James P. Johnson's all-black-musical *Runnin' Wild* (1923), which was the show that introduced the "Charleston" dance.²⁴⁶ Johnson was also a chamber musician. Together with the violinists Felix Weir and Arthur Boyd, and cellist Marion Cumbo, Johnson (who played the viola) formed the Negro String Quartet.²⁴⁷ They later renamed themselves the American String Quartet and performed in New York, DC, and Pennsylvania from roughly 1916 to 1927.

²⁴⁴ Simpson, 4; Carter, 189; Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 344-5. Europe composed the music for the Castles' dances and even invented several of the dances made popular by the Castles like the fox-trot and turkey trot. This was during the height of the dance craze. Europe had a recording contract with Victor Record Company in 1914.

²⁴⁵ Southern, 428. Some examples of famous performers in *Shuffle Along* are Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, Paul Robeson, and William Grant Still. Examples of famous songs from *Shuffle Along* are "Shuffle Along," "Love Will Find a Way," "In Honeysuckle Time," "Bandana Days," "The Gypsy Blues," and "I'm Just Wild About Harry."

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 432.

²⁴⁷ Simpson, 4; Carter, 189.

Defining the “true Negro spiritual”

Johnson’s musical background and privileged upbringing did not afford him many opportunities to hear spirituals sung in what he and other Harlem Renaissance intellectuals asserted was the genre’s authentic context—in a capella choral ensembles. Locke asserted that the Eva Jessye Choir and the Hall Johnson Singers are the closest examples of the genuine style of singing spirituals, as, in his opinion, they have “about restored the spirituals to their primitive choral basis and their original singing style.”²⁴⁸ He claimed that due to their efforts, “we may expect a development of Negro folk song that may equal or even outstrip the phenomenal choral music of Russia.”²⁴⁹ In Locke’s opinion, the Eva Jessye and Hall Johnson choirs successfully achieved “the actual mechanics of improvised Negro choral singing, with its syllabic quavers, off-tones and tone glides, improvised interpolations, subtle rhythmic variation.”²⁵⁰ In short, they performed the non-transcribable aspects of the Negro spiritual, yet maintained New Negro ideals by producing a sound that was highly polished. Locke claimed that “Before they completely vanish in their original form, this congregational folk-singing, with its unique breaks and tricks, should be recorded by phonograph, the only way their full values can be gotten.”²⁵¹ Forty years later, in an essay titled “Notes on the Negro Spiritual” published in 1965, Johnson claimed that *Green Pastures* and *Run, Little Chillun* (two successful Broadway musical plays that featured the Hall Johnson Choir and will

²⁴⁸ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 22.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22; Kraut 32-35; Cruz 19-42. Kraut discusses the role Negro spirituals played in attempts to authentically portray African American life and how Hurston positioned herself in this discourse. Jon Cruz discusses the “conundrum of authenticity” in the career of the spirituals, historically tracing how they became cultural markers of authenticity.

²⁵¹ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 22.

be discussed in the following chapters) were the only modern examples of how the spirituals were supposed to be sung because of the large a capella ensembles.²⁵²

However, Zora Neale Hurston, an established anthropologist and folklorist, claimed that the spirituals sung by the Hall Johnson choir were not genuine Negro spirituals, rather they were “neo-spirituals.”²⁵³ Hurston explained that although they were “Negroid,” they were also “so full of musicians tricks that Negro congregations are highly entertained when they hear their old songs so changed.”²⁵⁴ Hurston’s stated that “These church-goers never sing these versions of spirituals, and probably never hear them unless one of their children who has attended an all-black university and has learned the ‘neo-spirituals’ at school sings them for their parents.”²⁵⁵ She explains that the “real Negro singer” does not care about “good intonation,” harmonies are “jagged” and sometimes disharmonious, and singers join in and drop out any time they please. “Dissonances,” she asserts, are important and not to be ironed out by the trained musician.” In fact, Hurston claims, the “true Negro spiritual” cannot be taught to any group as “Its truth dies under training like flowers under hot water” and there are no set rules. Most importantly, “No two times singing is alike, so that we must consider the rendition of a song not as a final thing, but as a mood. It won’t be the same thing next Sunday.”²⁵⁶

²⁵² Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” 275.

²⁵³ Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” in *Negro: An Anthology* ed. Nancy Cunard (Ungar Publishing Co., 1970 orig. published 1934), 224.

²⁵⁴ Hurston, “The Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Negro: An Anthology*, 31, quoted in Gilroy, 92.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Regardless of Hurston's definition of the "true Negro spiritual," Johnson insisted that the Hall Johnson Choir was the only group capable of performing Negro spirituals in an authentic style in his 1965 essay. He even went so far as to assert that the ethnic records in the Library of Congress are not the spirituals "either in composition or performance."²⁵⁷ This statement was Johnson's attempt to stake his claim on the authenticity of his arrangements of Negro spirituals. Although we cannot be sure exactly which Library of Congress recordings Johnson was referring to, Alan Lomax's famous field recordings from the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia recorded in 1959-60 could have posed a threat to Johnson's claim to authenticity at the time he wrote "Notes on the Negro Spiritual" in 1965. Lomax's recordings were sung by the Georgia Sea Island Singers, a group assembled by Lydia Parrish who was devoted to preserving the songs and dances of the Sea Islanders—African Americans who were, according to Lomax, the least influenced by Euro-American culture. The Georgia Sea Island Singers allegedly sang the spirituals and work songs in the same manner they were sung during slavery because these islands were handed over to ex-slaves after the Civil War who passed this style of singing down several generations.²⁵⁸ Lomax also cites Melville Herskovitz to bolster his argument that these songs maintained the authentic African retentions of clapped accompaniments in complex polyrhythms, improvisation, and "shifting vocal qualities."²⁵⁹

I compare the recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir to those of the Georgia Sea Island Singers because, although there is a chronological gap of about thirty years between the two recordings, the Georgia Sea Island Singers' style is allegedly unchanged from the antebellum period.

²⁵⁷ Johnson, 274.

²⁵⁸ Alan Lomax, Liner Notes, *Georgia Sea Island Songs* New World Records 80278, 1960; digitized 1994, compact disc, p 2.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

Indeed, when comparing recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir to those of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, the former sounds polished, highly rehearsed, and a product of assimilation—the embodiment of New Negro ideals. The latter is its antithesis with out-of-tune moans, hand-clapping, and irregular phrasing. Furthermore, Hurston traveled with Alan Lomax when collecting folk recordings in St. Simon’s Island (one of the Georgia Sea Islands) in 1935. Unfortunately, the 1935 recordings are not available. However, her criteria of a “true Negro spiritual” (full of dissonances, “jagged” harmonies, and incorrect intonation) accurately describes the Lomax recordings of the Georgia Sea Island Singers from 1959-1960.

When comparing the recording of the spiritual “Shout All Over God’s Heaven” by the Hall Johnson Choir and the same song recorded by the Georgia Sea Islanders, we can hear some of the differences that Hurston outlines.²⁶⁰ In the Lomax recording the song is titled “Everybody’s Talkin About Heaven” and the most obvious difference between the two groups is the training and refinement of the Hall Johnson Choir. Even though the caller in the Johnson recording is not classically trained, the contrast between the rehearsed quality of the Johnson group is automatically audible. The Georgia Sea Islanders lack the theatrical character of the Hall Johnson Choir; their intonation and harmonies do not adhere to conventional standards of musical refinement in Western classical music. I posit that the “neo-spirituals” of the Hall Johnson Choir can be viewed as a product of New Negro ideals that promoted the performance of some popular aspects of primitivism in a style that also adapted Western music conventions.

Interestingly, Locke agrees with Hurston, citing Hurston’s statements on spirituals quoted above, agreeing that “neo-spirituals” is an appropriate term for the versions of spirituals that many

²⁶⁰ *Georgia Sea Island Songs* New World Records 80278, 1960; digitized 1994, compact disc; *1940s Vocal Groups Vol. 2 (1940-1945)*.

soloists and groups sing.²⁶¹ However, he conveniently leaves out the part where she directly criticizes the Hall Johnson Choir and other groups for performing these “neo-spirituals” and claims that the recordings of the Hall Johnson and Eva Jessye Choirs

will give us our closest reproduction of the genuine Negro way of singing these songs. Both of them, it will be noticed, have the actual mechanics of improvised Negro choral singing, with its syllabic quavers, off-tones and tone glides, improvised interpolations, subtle rhythmic variation. In most conventional versions of the spirituals there is too much melody and formal harmony. Over-emphasize the melodic elements of a spiritual, and you get a sentimental ballad à la Stephen Foster. Stress the harmony and you get a cloying glee or "barber-shop" chorus. Over-emphasize, on the other hand, the rhythmic idiom and instantly you secularize the product and it becomes a syncopated shout, with the religious tone and mood completely evaporated. It is only in a subtle fusion of these elements that the genuine folk spiritual exists or that it can be recaptured.²⁶²

Even current musicologists such as Marva Carter claims that Johnson did represent an authentic Negro singing style in his choral music, providing the example of his arrangement of “Elijah Rock!”²⁶³ In this Negro spiritual arrangement, Hall Johnson composed shouts, and the score is complete with blue notes, typical in many black vocal music styles. According to Carter, choir members deemed the composed shouts and blue notes “authentic.”²⁶⁴ Though shouts are characteristic of many Negro spirituals, the shouts in Johnson’s arrangement are still composed and meant to be performed the same manner every time. The improvisational nature of shouts as heard on the Georgia Sea Island recordings, or in Hurston’s descriptions of “true Negro spirituals” is greatly diminished. One can even go so far as to claim that it is non-existent.

²⁶¹ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 22-23.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Carter, 192-193.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 193.

Performance Practices of the Hall Johnson Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers

As explained in the introduction, the Fisk Choir that performed in Carnegie Hall in 1933 came from a long tradition of establishing Negro folk culture as appropriate for uplifting the race through the performance of spirituals. By adhering closely to Victorian ideals (comportment, manners, dress, dignified stage persona more akin to that of classical musicians), the original Fisk Jubilee Singers challenged many prejudices in the ways whites viewed the performance of Negro folk songs. Their performances also helped to further the idea that Negro folk songs such as the spirituals were truly *American* folk songs. Consequently, they also sought to prove that blacks could assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Although no recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Singers exist from 1933, there are early recordings from 1909-1955.²⁶⁵ When listened to alongside recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir from 1940-41 and their performance in the 1936 film, *The Green Pastures*, a few pertinent contrasts can be made that can inform us of why Downes, Locke, and Johnson himself believed that the Hall Johnson Choir's performance of Negro spirituals was more authentic than that of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.²⁶⁶ As W.J Henderson stated in the review quoted earlier in this chapter, the dynamics, diction, and rhythm in the Hall Johnson Choir's recordings are markedly different from those of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

²⁶⁵*Fisk Jubilee Singers Vol. 1 (1909-1911)*, Recorded January 1, 1997. Document Records, 1997, Streaming Audio, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/74675>. ; *Fisk Jubilee Singers Vol. 3 (1924-1940)*, Recorded January 1, 1997. Document Records, 1997, Streaming Audio, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/74480>. *The Fisk Jubilee Singers Directed By John W. Work: The Gold and Blue Album*, Scholastic Records SA 2372, LP, 1955.

²⁶⁶ *1940s Vocal Groups Vol. 2 (1940-1945)*. Recorded January 1, 1998. Document Records, 1998, Streaming Audio, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/74551>; *The Green Pastures*, directed by Marc Connelly and William Keighley (1936; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Home Video, 1993).

The Hall Johnson Choir emphasized characteristics that the Fisk Jubilee Singers seemed careful to eliminate or diminish, providing one explanation for the accolades they received from critics because they catered to current popular taste for primitivism. An excellent example is both group's recordings of "Great Camp Meeting in The Promised Land." The Fisk Jubilee Singers' male quartet recorded this spiritual in 1909 under the direction of John Work II and later a significantly larger Fisk Jubilee Singers choral ensemble recorded it in 1955 under the direction of John Work III who directed the touring octet since 1928.²⁶⁷ The recordings of this song provide examples of how a few aspects of the performance remained consistent, even though directors, ensemble size, and harmonies changed over time. In both recordings, the Fisk Jubilee Singers never sang in dialect, they did not utilize dynamics in the theatrical manner of the Hall Johnson Choir, and they did not emphasize the syncopated rhythms as much as the Hall Johnson Choir.

In "Great Camp Meeting," the Hall Johnson Choir effectively uses dynamics and orchestration to emphasize the text and bring variety to the repetitive call and response structure of the song.²⁶⁸ A caller sings "walk together chillun, talk together chillun, sing together..., pray together..., mourn together..., clap your hands... etc..." and the choir responds with "don't you get weary" and "there's a great camp meetin in the promised land." For the calls "pray together chillun" and "mourn together chillun," Johnson reduces the orchestration to just tenors and basses and also decreases the dynamic level. This emphasizes the solemnity of the text and also provides variety to the repetitions. The caller in the Hall Johnson Choir recording is a male tenor except for the one verse of "mourn together chillun" sung by a bass which further creates a grave character. Conversely, for the call "clap your hands chillun," the choir sings at a louder dynamic and the

²⁶⁷ Abbot and Seroff, 11.

²⁶⁸ *1940s Vocal Groups Vol. 2 (1940-1945)*.

sopranos improvise a phrase an octave above. The caller joins the choir in the chorus of “Goin to talk and never tire” (first chorus) and “Goin to mourn and never tire” (second chorus) which is sung with a louder dynamic, adding an exuberance to the chorus that forbids getting tired. Adding to this effect, Hall Johnson broadens the range of the choir by doubling the sopranos an octave above the altos and tenors in the final two phrases of the chorus.

In a radio program, Johnson explained that the spirituals were built around the lyrics of the songs and that the rhythm of the text was created by stressing certain syllables and letters and eliminating others.²⁶⁹ Some examples of letters that were stressed are *b*’s and examples of those that were not stressed were *r*’s and *g*’s at the end of words. He stated, “Some think there is beauty in the quaint pronunciation of the words, and at times, their still quaint and more charming mispronunciation.”²⁷⁰ In all the recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir that I have heard, the group pronounces dialect clearly by dropping *r*’s and *g*’s. For example, in “Great Campmeeting” words like “children” and “meeting” are changed to “chillun” and “meetin” and “tire” is “tiyah.” “The” is exchanged for “de.” The use of black dialect in all Hall Johnson Choir’s performances is consistent.

However, as previously mentioned, this was not the case with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In both the recordings from 1909 and 1955, there is no trace of dialect; “children,” “meeting,” “tire,” and “the” are all clearly pronounced without dialect. Along with the dynamic level that stays the same throughout the performance, and the lack of doubling or minimizing voices in the orchestration for dramatic effect, the Fisk Jubilee Singers sound decidedly “proper” and “straight laced” alongside the Hall Johnson Singers.

²⁶⁹ Johnson, “Some Aspects of the Negro Folk Song,” 229.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

As stated earlier, Johnson claimed that in order to preserve the emotional content of the spirituals, only the diction and precision of attack were maintained while very little effort was made to produce a refined sound. However, with the exception of “Shout All Over God’s Heaven,” and “Let the Church Roll On,” arrangements for all-male voices, where the soloist/caller does not have a classically trained voice, the overwhelming majority of Hall Johnson Choir recordings were extremely polished.²⁷¹ Even in the recordings of the aforementioned songs, the harmony is reminiscent of the barber shop harmony similar to the earlier Fisk Jubilee Singer recordings. In all of the Hall Johnson Singer’s recordings, as well as those of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the ensemble work is impeccable—the voices blend into one unit, the intonation is, for the most part, excellent and many of the soloists have classically trained voices.

Conclusion

The success of the Hall Johnson Choir lay in its ability to market itself as authentic, adhering to the definition of Negro folk culture as Southern, rural, and primitive. Johnson understood that appealing to the public’s appetite for Negro folk songs meant highlighting the essentialist characteristics and primitivisms of Negro folk culture and then branding it as an authentic representation of African Americans. Johnson’s relatively privileged background enabled him to create performances of Negro spirituals that interweaved his limited experiences with his grandmother with the carefully crafted Negro folk culture promoted by New Negro intellectuals. Because of his education and his family connections, he was in a unique position to understand the power of the celebrated primitivism in representations of Negro folk culture—using them to gain audience appeal, and consequently, a platform for his artistic goals.

²⁷¹ *1940s Vocal Groups Vol. 2 (1940-1945)*.

Negro folk culture, as it became known in post-bellum America, was shaped less directly by white Americans who were associated with the American Missionary Association and by elite, educated middle-upper class African Americans who had very little first-hand experience with the folk culture they so actively promoted. By the period known as the New Negro Renaissance (or Harlem Renaissance), Negro folk culture was an integral part of a new, modern, African American culture whose creators strove to produce art and literature that was on par with the works of Western, white American and European artists. By doing so, these African American artists hoped to prove that they possessed the cultivation, reasoning and intelligence that certain white Americans were assumed to have by virtue of being of the “right” ethnicity. As a result, the constructed Negro folk culture was a tool to prove that African Americans were a vital part of, and contributor to, American national culture; that their folk culture was as much a part of America as the nation’s very soil; and therefore they, too, were Americans deserving of civil rights.

By tracing the history of the post-bellum construction of Negro folk culture through African Americans’ non-minstrelsy performances of Negro spirituals from the original Fisk Jubilee’s first performance in 1871 to the performances of the Hall Johnson Choir in the 1930s, it is evident that the purpose of performing Negro spirituals was always to promote an image of a “New Negro.” This New Negro was to negate all of the stereotypes ascribed to “Old Negroes.” However, the meaning and representation of the New Negro gradually transformed between 1871-1933 and the performance of Negro spirituals took on different roles of significance in the construction of African American identity and its function in American national culture.

Just as the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed the New Negro’s politics of respectability during Reconstruction, the Hall Johnson Choir performed the Harlem Renaissance New Negro as defined by Alain Locke. This New Negro embraced and re-packaged primitivism in a way that appealed to white audiences, but asserted their role in the production of American national culture. The

following chapter further explores Hall Johnson's depiction of this definition of Negro folk culture in the 1933 production of his musical drama, *Run, Little Chillun* where Johnson explores the "primitive" Africanisms in the context of pseudo-voodoo rituals popular in theatrical productions in the 1920s and '30s.

Chapter 2

Dramatizing the Negro Spiritual, Dramatizing the Folk:

The 1933 Production of Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*

No doubt the future of American opera as a whole is much broader and more inclusive than that of Negro folk-play. Certainly, the white Americans will take to other subjects and to more elaborate forms for self-expression when at last they create. But it is possible that before that time the race which has not the white's self-consciousness and culture, but retains primitive impulse and emotion, and extraordinary musical sense, and a considerable folklore and folk-music of its own, may be able to produce a species of opera or lyric play which the public will value and to which it will listen. *Run, Little Chillun* is far from finished drama or opera either, but it has real life and genuine musical quality. Such qualities, in fact, as seem hardly to survive in the sterile and artificial music of the day

Olin Downes, 1933²⁷²

Hall Johnson's musical drama *Run, Little Chillun* opened at the Lyric Theater on Broadway on March 1, 1933. A product of New Negro ideals, it celebrates the primitivisms and Africanisms of Negro folk culture while subtly challenging racist stereotypes. *Run, Little Chillun* combines the seemingly opposing ideals of the art versus propaganda dichotomy debated by Locke, Du Bois, and other black intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance. In his folk music drama, Johnson strategically capitalized on what many white American cultural critics believed to be primitive—and therefore genuine—black culture. At the same time, he promoted a unique version of black empowerment through the beliefs of a fabricated pagan cult with an Oxford-educated cult leader.

Run, Little Chillun was the only theatrical work with both script and music authored by an African American to be performed on Broadway during the first part of the 1930s.²⁷³ Johnson's

²⁷² Olin Downes, "Final Scene of Hall Johnson's Negro 'Folk-Play' Indicates One Direction for Developing Native Genre" (*New York Times*, 1933), x5.

²⁷³ This is not to discount *Shuffle Along*, but that was a comedic revue—different from this dramatic genre, and a different period.

drama had immediate box office success and a wide-ranging, lasting impact on playwrights and musicians. It ran for 126 performances at the Lyric Theater, and in May 1933, just three months after opening, *Run Little Chillun* placed fifth among the longest-running shows on Broadway at the time.²⁷⁴ It then enjoyed a brief run at the historic Lafayette Theater in Harlem as well as revivals in Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco during the 1930s—the West Coast revivals performed under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration.²⁷⁵ *New York Times* theater critic Olin Downes believed that it provided white American composers with a model of “One Direction for developing [a] Native Genre.”²⁷⁶ The accounts of influential classical musicians such as Jascha Heifetz and Arturo Toscanini, many of whom attended performances of *Run, Little Chillun*, as well as concerts performed by the Hall Johnson Choir, show just how interested these musicians were in observing what many considered to be authentic performances of black culture.²⁷⁷ Virgil Thomson was so inspired by a performance of *Run, Little Chillun* that he decided that his opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, should be performed by an all-black cast, and George Gershwin, who attended multiple performances of *Run, Little Chillun* likely drew inspiration from it as he was then working on his opera, *Porgy and Bess*.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ “Run, Little Chillun is 5th in place for longest Running show,” *Chicago Defender*, May 27, 1933, 5.

²⁷⁵ James Hatch and Leo Hamalian. “Frances Hall Johnson,” in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940* ed James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian, 227-229 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 228.

²⁷⁶ Downes, 5.

²⁷⁷ Press Release for Hall Johnson Choir (n.d), Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

²⁷⁸ Quotes from Eleanor Roosevelt and George Gershwin appeared in an advertisement for a one-week run at the Shubert Theatre in Newark, beginning Nov. 13, 1933 (Newark, N.J.: Schubert Theatre, 1933), Hay Broadrides Library at Brown University; Virgil Thomson quoted by Carl Van Vechten, “Introduction,” *Four Saints in Three Acts: An Opera To Be Sung* (New York: Circle Blue Print Co., 1934), 7.

This chapter focuses primarily on the cultural significance of the two elaborate finales at the end of the first and second acts of the drama: an orgiastic song-and-dance ritual of the New Day Pilgrim cult and an emotional revival in the local Hope Baptist Church.²⁷⁹ There are contrasting displays of primitivism, as well as contrasting displays of Negro folk culture in both finales. They appealed to white audience's imagination of authentic black culture, and consequently, also received considerable attention from critics.²⁸⁰ Significantly, as one reviewer pointed out, Johnson did not choose a Holy Roller sect as his main protagonists--or the "Devil himself in the dance halls and the barrel houses." Rather, he portrayed an intellectualized fictional cult with an Oxford-educated leader and "Africanized" rituals.²⁸¹ This was unprecedented in contemporary theatrical works with similar subjects. As religious historian, Judith Wiesenfeld suggests, aspects of Johnson's personal life revealed in his unpublished poetry, notes written in his Bible, and letters suggest that there was likely a very personal motive behind the creation of the "Africanized" cult and the protagonist's struggle with sin and temptation. Therefore, the first part of this chapter begins with a synopsis of the drama that specifically highlights events that disclose parallels between Johnson's personal, spiritual journey and his creation of the New Day Pilgrims, the fictitious pagan cult. Part one of this chapter builds on Wiesenfeld's scholarship with a special emphasis placed on the music and the speeches in the script. I also claim that Johnson's cult had an affinity with Afrofuturism. This section is not devoted to uncovering the composer's intent, but instead to understanding the possible personal and cultural

²⁷⁹ Carl Van Vechten, On "Run, Little Chillun!" *New York Times*, March 19, 1933; Percy Hammond, "The Theaters: Negro Folk-Songs and Melodrama," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 23, 1933.

²⁸⁰ In addition to the articles cited above, I have examined over 50 reviews and concert reports on the 1933 Broadway production, many of which attribute the success of the musical drama to the finale of the first and second acts.

²⁸¹ Carl Carmer, "Run, Little Chillun!" A Critical Review, *Opportunity*, April, 1933, 113.

influences that led Johnson to create a cult with a strong Black Nationalist and Afrofuturistic message.

Where the first part of this chapter focuses on the more personal and spiritual influences on the creation of *Run, Little Chillun*, the second part is centered on economic and artistic influences. I explore several possible contributing factors to the creation of *Run, Little Chillun* such as Johnson's involvement as music director of Marc Connelly's play, *The Green Pastures* (1930), the folk drama movement in general, and the art versus propaganda debate of the New Negro Renaissance. I seek to expand Marva Carter's scholarship by placing *Run, Little Chillun* within the context of the New Negro ideals of the Harlem Renaissance.²⁸² Although the literary and artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance greatly decreased after the stock market crash in 1929, New Negro ideals were carried forth by intelligentsia and artists like Hall Johnson during the 1930s (and beyond).²⁸³

Throughout this chapter, I explore ideas of authenticity expressed by both black and white critics, probing why some were determined to view aspects of *Run, Little Chillun* as genuine representations of Negro folk culture—even in the New Day Pilgrim scene. I delve into cultural politics surrounding the creation of the New Day Pilgrim dance scene and the music in the Hope Baptist revival scene, discussing the reception of this work by both black and white critics.

In the third part of this chapter I draw on the newspaper reviews of both the black and white press, uncovering their perception on issues of representation and the impact of primitivisms in attracting white audiences. Carl Van Vechten's review of *Run, Little Chillun* is contrasted with that of William Kelley, a prominent black journalist of the *New York Amsterdam News*, who claimed that

²⁸² Marva Griffin Carter, "The 'New Negro' Choral Legacy of Hall Johnson" in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 196-. Although Marva Carter does place Johnson's overall oeuvre in the context of the New Negro Renaissance, she does not discuss, in detail, the portrayal of renaissance ideals in *Run, Little Chillun*.

²⁸³ Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of The Harlem Renaissance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997) xvii-xxi.

the concept of “double consciousness,” as framed by W. E. B. Dubois, was crucial-for black audience members to appreciate *Run, Little Chillun* fully. This chapter closes with a brief comparison of *Run, Little Chillun* to contemporary Negro folk dramas by black playwrights as a way of understanding what made Johnson’s work successful.²⁸⁴

Part I:

The Script of *Run, Little Chillun* and Johnson’s Religious Journey

Set in the imaginary town of “Toomer’s Bottom” in the rural South in 1929, *Run, Little Chillun* dramatized the plight of Jim, a minister’s son battling an existential conflict between two competing religious groups—his church, Hope Baptist, where he was groomed to be a pastor, and the nature-worshipping New Day Pilgrim cult. Jim is also torn between two lovers: his pious wife, Ella, and the town’s wayward vixen, Sulamai. In the opening scene, the audience learns of the tension between the members of the Hope Baptist Church and their rival group, the Cult of The New Day Pilgrims. The members of Hope Baptist are upset about losing followers to the New Day Pilgrims calling them “dem big Africans wid no close on....wid a lot of heathenish notions sich as holdin’ meetin’ in de woods, singin’ unknown tounges, dancin’ half-naked, playin’ guitars, banjers an’ sich, an’ doin’ all other sorts of things dat ain’t fitten fer civilized folks to do.”²⁸⁵ Their disgust with the New Day Pilgrims is heightened by the fact that the Hope Baptists are in the middle of a revival

²⁸⁴ Not all plays categorized as Negro folk dramas were authored by black playwrights. Plays such as Dubose Heyward’s *Porgy* and Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures* were both considered Negro folk dramas even by black intellectuals such as Alain Locke.

²⁸⁵ Hall Johnson, “Run, Little Chillun,” in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*, ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 234, 235.

and they do not hesitate to tell the reverend, Jim's father, that his son's lover, Sulamai, has been tempting Jim to join the cult.

Although Jim's wife, Ella, knows that Jim had been cheating on her for some time with Sulamai, Ella is confident that he will return to her. However, Ella is more concerned that Jim is losing his faith than his infidelity, and pleads,

Jim don' let dat 'oman make you lose yo' soul. Ef you want to stay out with her night after night, I can't stop you. After all, I'm a 'oman, and she's a 'oman, an' it ain't de fus time two women wanted de same man. But don' let 'er off straight to hell—followin' up these African devils."²⁸⁶

In this heart-wrenching confrontation between the married couple, Jim explains that his religion “don't seem to support me no mo' like it used to” and that he doesn't feel wicked when he is with Sulamai and, as he explains, “I feel like a man that wants a man's life. An' it don't fit in with no sermons.”²⁸⁷ He also tells Ella that if it wasn't Sulamai, he would be with another woman and that the Pilgrims might be able to explain the questions he has.

Sulamai, on the other hand, tells Jim that the Pilgrims' spokesman, Brother Moses—who receives the divine thoughts of Elder Tongola (the cult's mute, aging African founder) through telepathy—teaches about sin in a way that causes her to believe she is supposed to be with Jim. She continues, claiming that Brother Moses defined sin as merely the bad feeling one gets as a punishment from God for humans who think they are better than other creatures. If there is no bad feeling, there is no sin.²⁸⁸ She describes Brother Moses with much admiration, praising his intelligence and education at Oxford University, causing Jim to suspect that Sulamai has been, or will, seduce the leader of the cult if given the chance.²⁸⁹ Driven in part by his curiosity of the

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 242.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 243.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 249.

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 247, 250.

teachings of the cult as well as his jealousy, Jim attends a New Day Pilgrim meeting with Sulamai, held outdoors on a moonlit night.

After the more somber parts of the New Day Pilgrim ceremony, which include singing and a speech by Brother Moses, the Pilgrims rejoice with dancing that was described by one reviewer from the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a prominent black newspaper of the time, as “so weird, so fantastic, so nerve tinkling... that the savagery of it all seems to draw the audience out of its seats to become a part of this mob of humanity that seems to turn itself loose to riotous abandon.”²⁹⁰ Inspired by the dance, Sulamai throws off her robe, hurling herself among the dancers, stealing the spotlight from Reba (a New Day Pilgrim member who was betrothed to Brother Moses) and catching the attention of Brother Moses who watches her lustfully.²⁹¹ Jim’s jealousy is confirmed as he notices Brother Moses’s fixation on Sulamai, and with determination, he rushes into the crowd, picks up Sulamai, slings her over his shoulder, and runs offstage. Brother Moses tries to chase the couple, but is stopped by the New Day Pilgrim’s Mother Kanda who “gives him an indignant, questioning look,” while Reba, her daughter, stares “with startled eyes.”²⁹²

In the second act, Jim runs into Kanda in front of Sulamai’s house—both looking for Sulamai. Kanda urges Jim to convince Sulamai never to return to the New Day Pilgrims, explaining that Sulamai has the power to lead Brother Moses into the “Vale of Illusion” and warns Jim, “You alone can save Sulamai. Take her back to your church—take her to another town. Take her anywhere, but you must hurry before Elder Tongola takes her with him.”²⁹³ Before Kanda departs,

²⁹⁰ “Play is Novel Production: Hall Johnson Tops Heights in Offering,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1933.

²⁹¹ Johnson, 254.

²⁹² Ibid. 254-5.

²⁹³ Ibid., 258.

she gives Jim a letter addressed to Sulamai, written by her daughter Reba and dictated by Elder Tongola. It is Tongola's last message before he leaves earth at midnight in a storm. The letter explains that Brother Moses is not allowed to look at any other woman but Reba and that if Sulamai returns, Elder Tongola threatens to destroy both her and Brother Moses.

After Kanda leaves, Sulamai enters the scene. Jim, who was not impressed with the New Day Pilgrims, informs Sulamai that he will return to Hope Baptist. Afraid she will lose him, Sulamai claims that she is pregnant with Jim's child and threatens to parade his baby in front of the congregation. Under pressure of the threat of losing any remaining respect from his community, Jim then proposes that they start a new life together, taking the train to a town where nobody knows them. Sulamai stubbornly refuses, and Jim leaves, frustrated. Brother Moses professes his interest in Sulamai, proclaiming that he has not been able to do anything besides think about her since he saw her dance. Insisting that he does not care that Sulamai is pregnant with Jim's child, he implores her to escape with him (also on a train) to a place where no one knows them under one condition: that she accompany him to ask Elder Tongola's consent before he leaves earth that night. He tries to convince Sulamai that it is for her protection that they get consent from Elder Tongola, but Sulamai refuses, and says that she will go with Brother Moses only if he promises not to ask permission and only if he meets her at the church at midnight. Thunder and lightning bring this scene to a dramatic close.²⁹⁴ (See the picture of the final scenes from the Hall Johnson archives on the following page).

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 259-267.



Figure 5.2: Top – New Day Pilgrim processional; middle—Hall Johnson; bottom – Revival scene²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ "In Tune with Our Times," n.d., source unknown. The Hall Johnson Collection.

Africanisms and New Negro Ideals in the Theology and Music of the New Day Pilgrims

Some scholars, such as Brenda Murphy, believe that *Run, Little Chillun* represents the alleged African characteristic of the New Day Pilgrims as primitive, uncontrollable, and dangerous, while the black man's salvation is portrayed as simple, joyous Christianity. She claims, "dangerous paganism is renounced in favor of jubilant Christianity."²⁹⁶ Indeed, reviewers of the 1933 production reflected this same conclusion: that the God of the Hope Baptists won the fight for Jim's soul, avenging the evil temptations that were allegedly inflicted on him.²⁹⁷ However, they have misinterpreted Johnson's work as the script portrays the New Day Pilgrims as an intelligent group who offer an alternative religion specifically for black people. Furthermore, Johnson does not reveal which God wins the ultimate revenge at the end of the drama, leaving it to the audience to decide.

Because Johnson established that the Pilgrims are a purely fictional cult, he had the freedom to experiment with African-inspired representations of religion and primitivism, which can be read as a criticism of Christianity clothed in New Negro ideals. In the script, he makes a clear distinction between an authentic vodun cult and the New Day Pilgrims stating,

The general impression should be of something approaching voodoo—not too directly African, but with a strong African flavor. Since the cult is not designated by any familiar name, any feature may be introduced which serves to make the whole scene more striking without any chance of controversy or any possibility of offense to any existing religious group.²⁹⁸

By incorporating vague and symbolic Africanisms in the New Day Pilgrim ceremony, Johnson created a fictional cult that satisfied the appetite for primitivism. This was consistent with Alain

²⁹⁶ Brenda Murphy, "Plays and Playwrights: 1915-1945" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, 310. See also Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁹⁷ This is covered more extensively in Judith Weisenfeld, "'The Secret at the Root': Performing African American Religious Modernity in Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun*," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 21, no. 1 (2011): 39-80.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.

Locke's and Du Bois's encouragement to young black artists to draw on Africanisms in their art in a similar manner as their white peers. As a result, Johnson's use of Africanisms and primitivisms in the music and dance in this scene was multilayered and contradictory.

The scene begins with four solitary beats of a vodun ceremonial drum signaling the beginning of the New Day Pilgrim's Processional held outdoors in a wooded area on a "soft night with a moon."²⁹⁹ Following two New Day Pilgrim novitiates and a gift bearer were the leaders of the cult: Brother Moses who is wearing a headdress with horns, and the aged founder, Elder Tongola, who is bent and wrinkled with long, wooly, white hair, and described as African in the script. Behind the leaders are Kanda, the aging daughter of Elder Tongola and her young daughter, Reba. The rest of the New Day Pilgrims followed, all wearing long white robes and singing.

The drumbeats punctuate each phrase of the music of the Processional, prominently featuring one of the most stereotypical tropes of Africanism. Johnson also makes use of an antiphonal style within a religious setting, creating a sense of gravitas by featuring musical elements found in Negro spirituals and Western choral music alike [see example 1.2]. Rather than sounding like exoticized primitive "jungle music," the Processional sounds more like the exoticized music of Western classical composers such as the temple scene from Act 1 Scene 2 of Verdi's *Aida* because of the modal quality, call and response form, and a capella score. In *Aida*, the priestesses conduct a solemn religious ceremony in the Temple of Vulcan, and like the New Day Pilgrims, the choir of priestesses sings unaccompanied, modal, call and response music.³⁰⁰ Several critics of the 1938 production remark on the similarity between *Aida* and the solemn aspects of the New Day Pilgrim

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 251.

³⁰⁰ Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida: Opera in Four Acts* (Milano: Ricordi, 1965), 62-66.

scene (I discuss this in the following chapter).³⁰¹ Even Chappy Gardner, African American journalist and theater critic for the *Chicago Defender*, identified a generalized exoticism in the New Day Pilgrim Processional, claiming that this opening segment sounded like “A Chinese Wedding March I heard in Chinatown.”³⁰²

³⁰¹ “Run, Little Chillun is a Musical Treat,” *Variety*, July, 23 1938. This reviewer compared the New Day Pilgrim scene to *Aida*, claiming that the 150 person choir rivals other opera companies, explaining, “The music, written and arranged by Johnson, is more sincerely impressive than the consecration scene in ‘Aida.’”

³⁰² Chappy Gardner, “‘Run, Little Chillun’ Decides not to Close” *Chicago Defender* (June 17, 1933), 5.

Run, Little Chillun: Processional

Hall Johnson

Soprano
(Drums)

Alto
(Drums)

TENOR 1
(Drums) Ton - go - la Po Ma-ne Ka-la Ve - de - a

TENOR 2
(Drums) Ton - go - la Po Ma-ne Ka-la Ve - de - a

BASS 1
(Drums) Ton - go - la Po Ma-ne Ka-la Ve - de - a

BASS 2
(Drums)

³⁰³ Hall Johnson, “Processional,” n.d., sketches of score in the Hall Johnson Collection, Eugene Simpson.

Example 2.2: Processional from *Run, Little Chillun* (Continued).

2
6

Soprano

Alto

TENOR 1

TENOR 2

BASS 1

BASS 2

(Drums)

Ton - go - la

Po Mane Ka la

Ve - de - a

After three more solitary beats of the tom-tom, the entire choir (except for the first sopranos) repeats the opening phrase at fortissimo, creating a voluminous response. The texture of the Processional is monophonic, and with the exception of a few measures (which are briefly homophonic), remains so throughout the entire procession. Using this simple texture, Johnson brings the short Processional to a climax by gradually adding more voices for each “response” to the “call” sung by the tenors and basses. As the Processional builds to a climax, the song becomes more homophonic and the alternation of phrases between voices becomes more frequent, with voices added in each phrase. In the final eight measures, a phrase punctuated by a dotted eighth-note rhythm followed by a half note propels the music towards a dramatic finale. This phrase is rapidly exchanged by two groups: the first soprano and altos vs. the bass, tenor, and second sopranos [see example 2.2].

Example 3.2: "Processional," final eight measures.³⁰⁴

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system contains six staves for vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, TENOR 1, TENOR 2, BASS 1, and BASS 2. The lyrics for these parts are: "Ton - go - la ka - la", "Ton - go - la Jo - ba", and "Ton - go - la e - di - ta". The second system contains six staves for vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, TENOR 1, TENOR 2, BASS 1, and BASS 2. The lyrics for these parts are: "Mo -", "Mo -", and "Mo -". The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, key signatures, time signatures, and lyrics.

System 1:

- Soprano:** Ton - go - la ka - la, Ton - go - la Jo - ba, Ton - go - la e - di - ta
- Alto:** (No lyrics shown)
- TENOR 1:** Ton - go - la ka - la, Ton - go - la Jo - ba, Ton - go - la e - di - ta
- TENOR 2:** Ton - go - la ka - la, Ton - go - la Jo - ba, Ton - go - la e - di - ta
- BASS 1:** Ton - go - la ka - la, Ton - go - la Jo - ba, e - di - ta
- BASS 2:** Ton - go - la ka - la, Ton - go - la Jo - ba, e - di - ta

System 2:

- Soprano:** Mo -
- Alto:** Mo -
- TENOR 1:** Mo -
- TENOR 2:** Mo -
- BASS 1:** Mo -
- BASS 2:** Mo -

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

In this excerpt, the Pilgrims are chanting “Tongola po manekola veda” in a language that Johnson created, which he named Tongola after the cult’s elderly African founder. In an article in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Johnson explained that he drew from Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit when creating this language. Significantly, he did not use African or Haitian languages, but liturgical languages associated with ancient religious practices—an interesting source for the fabricated language of a cult that was supposed to represent “American Negroes getting back to nature worship” as Johnson indicated in the script.³⁰⁵ Johnson disliked the comparison of Tongola to Hog-Latin, and according to this article, he took the language very seriously, holding classes in Tongola for the actors and choir members in *Run, Little Chillun*.³⁰⁶ The article reports that he taught them phrases like “Honange Mo” is Almighty God, that “Tame” is life, “Kola” beauty, and “Kala” light. According to the article, the songs were translated into formal English verse, and Johnson claimed that “in three years they will want a Tongola grammar.” The music as well as the story of the creation of Tongola indicate that Johnson aimed to infuse the New Day Pilgrims with an air of dignity, with sonic resemblances to exoticized religious ceremonies such as the *Aida* scene mentioned above. His compositional choices confirm that he did not create the Pilgrims as a heathen foil for the Hope Baptists. Much like his employment of certain compositional techniques, his choice in the origins of the stage language is a deliberate one that creates a religious, yet exotic sound.³⁰⁷

Following the Processional, Brother Moses delivers a speech about the history and theology of the cult, explaining that “The Bright Ones,” a superior race of people who lived on the earth

³⁰⁵ “Hall Johnson Invented Own Language for Play: Run, Little Chillun,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov 25, 1933, 19.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. Hog-Latin is the term used in the article. It is probably the same as Pig-Latin.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

thousands of years ago, were removed to make room for the inferior human race. However, these divine beings selected one from among themselves to guide the human race. Elder Tongola is the appointed superior being who transmits his thoughts via telepathy to Brother Moses who then imparts them to the people. The message communicated to Brother Moses from Elder Tongola is a “high Gospel of Joy,” which was birthed out of Tongola’s pain and suffering.³⁰⁸ This gospel preaches the “enduring spiritual qualities of laughter, dancing and song.”³⁰⁹ Through Tongola’s teachings preached by Brother Moses, the Pilgrims learn the “joy of living” by dancing to the “rhythm which sets the Universe in motion” and “song that makes articulate the soul.”³¹⁰ Brother Moses concluded his sermon, emphasizing that this religion is for the liberation of specifically black people. Directing his message to black Christians, he exclaims, “the Black man’s God has never been a God of blood and malice. He has never meant that His children should suffer in His name. To know Him brings peace and joy and well-being.”³¹¹ The followers then repeat after him, “God is One!” “Nature is One!” “God and Nature and Joy is One!” “Let us be as one soul having many bodies!”³¹² Brother Moses’s sermon describes the history of African Americans as one filled with turmoil and sorrow inflicted by slavery:

For, from the accumulated torrents of your tears of sorrow, you have distilled the laughter which bespeaks the joy of living; the very chains that once bound your feet so securely have also taught them how to dance the rhythm which sets the Universe in motion; and out of the deep-throated cries of your most bitter anguish you have created the song that makes articulate the soul.³¹³

³⁰⁸ Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 252.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 253.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid. 253.

³¹³ Ibid.

To conclude his speech, Brother Moses sings an eerie intonation of a Credo with an antiphonal form similar to the Processional [see example 3].

Example 4.2: Credo intonation from *Run, Little Chillun*.³¹⁴



The solemn, dignified Credo was followed by a dance that critics praised as “wild, barbaric, fantastical, and authentic.” The dance scene began with a slow solo performed by Reba, but gradually increased in tempo until the dancers leapt out of the woods and began beating “wild rhythms” on the drums.³¹⁵ These dancers are not wearing the white robes of the other Pilgrims, but are scantily clothed, wearing loin cloths and feathered headdresses.

The New Day Pilgrims and Johnson’s Spiritual Quest

Religion historian Judith Weisenfeld and Hall Johnson’s biographer Eugene Simpson assert that there is a strong biographical connection between Johnson himself and the protagonist of his play.³¹⁶ Johnson, they believe, had the dual motive of dramatizing authentic Negro folk culture in the Hope Baptist scenes while also promoting an alternative theological view. This, Weisenfeld claims, is not obvious when taking the play at face value, but takes a careful reading of Johnson’s program notes, examining Johnson’s Bible, and some of his personal writings. Using evidence from these sources, she concludes that the New Day Pilgrim cult and their theology were actually more than

³¹⁴ Johnson, Sketches.

³¹⁵ “‘Run, Little Chillun’ Has Dancing as Well as Song,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1933.

³¹⁶ Weisenfeld, 52.

just a heathen foil for the Hope Baptists—they were a means for Johnson to work out some of the existential questions he dealt with as a minister’s son who had difficulty with conforming to conventional Christianity.³¹⁷

According to Simpson, like Jim, Hall Johnson had a few extramarital lovers—both male and female.³¹⁸ He also struggled with a crippling addiction to alcohol that often affected his work.³¹⁹ Weisenfeld suggests that the markings in Johnson’s Bible indicate that he was searching for healing and transformation and that he struggled with accepting the theology of the omnipotence of God, feeling instead, a sense of abandonment and disillusion.³²⁰ For example, Johnson crossed out Galatians 5:17 “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.”³²¹ He also crossed out Psalm 16:10-11, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures evermore.”³²² It was as if Johnson was expressing himself through the protagonist of his play when Jim said to his wife Ella,

I was—born and brought up in Hope Baptist Church. When I come outa school I stepped right in de pulpit an’ preached to these people I’d been brought up with. Now, I jes’...can’t do it no mo’. I can’t do the things I tell them to do. I ain’t never goin’ preach agin’...I mean that my religion don’t seem to support me no mo’ like it used to...Somethin’ must’ be wrong somewhere—or else God made me wrong to start with. But there’s other

³¹⁷ Weisenfeld, 58-59, Eugene Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 72-79.

³¹⁸ Weisenfeld, 58-59.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Weisenfeld 56-8.

³²¹ Ibid., 57.

³²² Ibid.

things I want to know for my own peace, things I've got to know since I feel so different.³²³

Simpson and Weisenfeld also suggest that the theology of the New Day Pilgrims was influenced by Johnson's interest in Christian Science. A four-page article on prayer from the June 1922 issue of the Christian Science Journal was folded inside Johnson's Bible, and Weisenfeld points out that there were several African Americans involved in Christian Science during the 1920s and 30s.³²⁴ However, aside from the article inside Johnson's Bible, we do not know the extent to which Johnson was involved with or interested in Christian Science. If he was actually well-versed in the writings of Mary Baker Eddy and other Christian Science publications, he might have been intrigued by the concept of malicious animal magnetism or malicious malpractice described by Eddy as forces of evil against the healing good of Christian Science.³²⁵ But, contrary to what Simpson and Weisenfeld suggest, I see little connection to the New Day Pilgrims because Christian Science is predominantly about believing that physical sickness is the result of what Christian Scientists refer to as wrong thinking.³²⁶ This wrong thinking is the direct result of not understanding the Bible correctly, leading to a lack of faith, ineffectual prayer and the inability to achieve physical healing. Wrong thinking is the sin that keeps mankind from experiencing all of the benefits God grants his followers, namely health and wealth.

The core belief of Christian Science has connections to a mind-healing movement related to Christian Science that originated in the 19th century termed New Thought. The beliefs that God

³²³ Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 242- 243.

³²⁴ Weisenfeld, 55.

³²⁵ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health: With Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Armstrong, 1907), 100-106.

³²⁶ Eddy, 107-9.

exists in all people, illness is a result of sin, and sin is wrong thinking was birthed out of the New Thought movement in the 19th century led by American philosopher, and magnetist Phineas Quimby. He taught that channeling positive thinking (as opposed to wrong thinking) leads to good health and financial success.³²⁷ A century later, these tenants of New Thought were also shared by the African American cult leader Father Divine who was at the height of his popularity during the depression.³²⁸

Father Divine had an immense influence on poor black communities because his teaching assured them that with the proper thinking, one could achieve good health and wealth. He also founded outreaches to teach job training and supported the fight for civil rights for blacks.³²⁹ Like Christian Science and New Thought, Father Divine taught that sin is the result of wrong thinking, which was also an important aspect of the New Day Pilgrim religion. Father Divine is most well-known for declaring that he was God. Like many followers of New Thought, he believed that since God existed in all people, he was divine and could speak God's thoughts. This may have been inspiration for Elder Tongola's capacity to convey his thoughts via telepathy to Brother Moses, who was then able to speak them orally. Comparisons between Father Divine and Brother Moses were made by one reviewer of *Run, Little Chillun* because of the similarities in theology between Divine's cult and the New Day Pilgrims. The reviewer observed, "Hall Johnson's genius, to which he has added the old-time religion as preached by Father Divine, the Rev. G. Wilson Becton, Billy Sunday and the Ever Live and Never Die Cult, is giving Broadway an eye and ear full in '*Run, Little*

³²⁷ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 22.

³²⁸ Weisenfeld, 55-56; Watts, 61-62.

³²⁹ Watts, 61, 118.

*Chillum!*³³⁰ During the San Francisco Federal Theater Project production of *Run, Little Chillum* in 1939, Johnson himself confirmed that Father Divine was an inspiration for the New Day Pilgrims.³³¹

Although there are parallels between Father Divine's teachings and the New Day Pilgrims, some aspects of Johnson's fictional cult depart significantly from the teachings of Father Divine, who taught that race did not exist, but was the result of wrong thinking. He commanded his followers to abolish racial labels from their vocabulary and chastised those who identified as black because he believed this would cause them to fall prey to negative stereotypes of blacks.³³² Because acknowledging race was a sin (the result of wrong thinking), he believed that African Americans brought racism upon themselves.³³³ Unlike Father Divine, Johnson emphasizes the distinction between the black man's God and the God of other races. Through Brother Moses's speech, Johnson asserted that it was not the black man's God that caused the suffering of black people. Rather, the black man's god brings peace and well-being.

This fictional theology of liberation, which was specifically for black people, was based on an origin story akin to those found in Afrofuturistic fiction. An aesthetic mode found in science fiction, music, and other art forms, Afrofuturism re-claims the history of the past, with a fictional origin story that enables black protagonists to imagine a better future for black people.³³⁴ I posit that more than any possible influences of Father Divine, New Thought, or Christian Science, the New Day Pilgrim's theology more closely resembles Afrofuturism. As early as 1920, science fiction novels

³³⁰ William Kelley, "Timely and Untimely Topics: Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 22, 1933.

³³¹ *San Francisco Chronicle* (January 15, 1939) in *Run, Little Chillum* scrapbook, Hall Johnson Collection.

³³² Watts, xii.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Mark Dery, "Black to The Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

written by black authors, with a primary focus on race, explored what race relations can be like in a futuristic setting. In the process of doing so, they often re-created a past or origin story for black people.³³⁵ The New Day Pilgrim's origin story of "The Bright Ones" outlined in the script is consistent with characteristics of Afrofuturism.³³⁶ They were an African race of superior beings who once inhabited the earth, but moved to another galactic realm. Mentally and physically superior, "The Bright Ones" created a religion that liberated other black people. Via telepathy, they proclaimed, "Make ready for the coming of the New Day" and "rise, Oh Black people of the earth! Tell all the nations what you have learned past the possibility of any forgetting."³³⁷ In fact, the entire theology of the New Day Pilgrims is an anti-colonial critique of Christianity because it compels its followers to tap into the strength of the "Bright Ones" and rise above their oppressed status brought on by wrongful thinking of the white man's religion. This anticolonial bent aligns the New Day Pilgrims with Afrofuturistic fiction.

Regardless of what religion, ideology, or personal existential questions inspired Johnson to create the New Day Pilgrims, he resourcefully drew from contemporary culture to construct a religious group that not only provided contrast to the Hope Baptists, but allowed him to critique their practice of Christianity. The theology of the New Day Pilgrims was in direct opposition to Protestant Christianity, in which the repentance of sins provides the only path to salvation. New

³³⁵ Sheree R. Thomas, introduction to *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner Books, 2000), xi-xii. An early example of this is W.E.B DuBois's novel *The Comet* (1920) which portrayed the relationship between a black man who discovered that he was the last man on earth, and a white woman who was the last woman on earth. The characters in Du Bois's novel were both portrayed as Adam and Eve-like characters—making a black man, then socially the lowest man on earth, the highest. Du Bois places his characters in a world where they, the only people on earth, could create a fair, just, and possibly post-racial world.

³³⁶ Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy*, 20. No. 3 (2006), accessed December 14, 2014, <http://sdonline.org/42/afrofuturism-science-fiction-and-the-history-of-the-future>.

³³⁷ Johnson, 252-3.

Day Pilgrims, on the other hand, are free from sin; as long as they think positive thoughts, they need not feel any guilt for their actions. The Pilgrims also discouraged any religion that required its followers to worship a God who allows suffering, or a religion that was a product of colonialism.

Portraying Africanisms in Negro folk culture: Dance in the New Day Pilgrim Scene

Anthea Kraut, like English-literature scholar Rena Fraden and Brenda Murphy, claims that the New Day Pilgrim's scene was merely a replication of negative stereotypical theatrical presentations of voodoo, jungle, and African dance in order to ensure a box office success.³³⁸ Obviously, Johnson did not strive for an accurate depiction of African or Afro-Caribbean culture. As mentioned previously, he created the language of the New Day Pilgrims based on the ancient languages of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, composed music that is similar to exoticist music of Western classical composers, and wrote a sermon orated by an Oxford-educated man. Johnson also wrote directions in the script for the dance to have an African flavor but not accurately represent African culture and to have resemblances with voodoo. In the script, he further explained that the reason for this vague African and voodoo character, as well as the lack of resemblance to any particular cult, allowed for any type of primitivism to be introduced. This made "the whole scene more striking without any chance of controversy or any possibility of offense to any existing religious group."³³⁹

As Kraut asserts, there is significant overlap between the New Day Pilgrim dance and the Bahamian Fire Dance as performed in Hurston's revue *The Great Day*, which opened two months

³³⁸ Murphy, 309. Fraden, 170.

³³⁹ Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 251.

before *Run, Little Chillun* on January 10 1932. At some point between October 15th and 26th of 1932, Zora Neale Hurston asked Hall Johnson if he was interested in collaborating to stage folk material that she had gathered during anthropological research in the South and the Bahamas. Hurston collected folk songs as well as dances and sought to incorporate the culture of West Indian migrants in a staged performance. She had offered her collection of folk songs to Johnson the previous year when she became convinced of their potential for performance. At the time, Johnson turned her down, believing that the public only wanted to hear “well arranged” spirituals (according to Kraut’s account), and Hurston was determined to prove him wrong.”³⁴⁰ However, he agreed to work with her when she proposed a collaboration with her dancers and his singers. As a result, Hurston’s dancers rehearsed with Johnson’s singers in late 1932.

In her autobiography, Hurston recounts instances where Johnson did not show up for rehearsals as well as moments when Johnson’s singers mocked the choreography of the Bahamian Dancers calling them “monkey chasers,” a common derogatory term used by African Americans for West Indians.³⁴¹ The prejudice the dancers encountered enraged Hurston, and she ended the collaboration. However, Johnson enlisted some members of her dance group for *Run, Little Chillun*, angering Hurston.³⁴² Kraut believes that *Run, Little Chillun* was produced in secrecy mainly because

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 95.

³⁴¹ Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 97. The term “monkey chasers” comes from the racist rumor that West Indians hunt monkeys and stew them with rice.

³⁴² Kraut, 186. Kraut uses correspondences, programs, newspaper reports, and autobiographical accounts to understand how the Bahamian dancers ended up in Johnson’s show. We know for sure that Leonard Stirrup and John Dowason were two of Hurston’s Bahamian Dancers who also danced in *Run, Little Chillun*. Their involvement is described on page 45 of this chapter.

Johnson was slowly pushing Hurston out of the collaboration, claiming all creative authority for himself.³⁴³

The dancers in *The Great Day* were presented by Hurston, as well as the press, as Bahamian natives so as to prove the authenticity of the dance. However, it is safe to assume that most of them were not Bahamian.³⁴⁴ The Bahamian Fire Dance consisted of three parts that celebrate the arrival of spring: the Jumping Dance, Ring Play, and Crow Dance. Not only were some of the dancers the same in both shows, but the choreography in Hurston's review bore striking resemblance to that in *Run, Little Chillun*. Yet, the choreography for Johnson's play was attributed to the famous white modern dancer, Doris Humphrey—Hurston was never given credit. Hurston complained that Johnson stole her dancers and even claimed that the New Day Pilgrim dance was the “spitting image” of the Bahamian Fire Dance.³⁴⁵ Further proof of the similarity between the two performances is in a letter that Doris Humphrey wrote to her parents.

Humphrey was a lead dancer in the prominent Denishawn Dance Company. She was also co-founder of the Humphrey-Weidman school and company dedicated to establishing a contemporary American dance form with works based on American subjects.³⁴⁶ She took the job of choreographer for *Run, Little Chillun* after Johnson asked her to “help with a voodoo scene,” even though she did not care for the play.³⁴⁷ She describes the dancers saying, “These people, or their

³⁴³ “One Man Show,” Simpson, 175. Kraut does not take into account the fact that Johnson was still involved in *The Green Pastures* at the time and that he was probably creating the script and music as he continued rehearsals, which would explain the lack of publicity. Furthermore, Johnson did not first write a play and then find musicians and actors to perform it, and according to the account mentioned earlier, he may not have intended to write the book of *Run, Little Chillun* himself.

³⁴⁴ Kraut, 77. Kraut provides proof that at least one of these dancers was actually from New Rochelle, NY.

³⁴⁵ Kraut, 188.

³⁴⁶ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 77-79.

³⁴⁷ Doris Humphrey Letter to Family (February, 1933) Doris Humphrey Collection, Performing Arts Research Collections-Dance Division, The New York Public Library. Also quoted in Kraut, 189.

ancestors were brought from Africa to the Bahamas or some isolated place down there and have kept up the ritual of the dances pretty much untouched ever since.”³⁴⁸ She also describes their dances as “savage” and, as a result, had a “real native look”—continuing the popular narrative that these dances were realistic because they were savage. Humphrey describes some of the dances and her descriptions match those provided in program notes for Hurston’s stagings of the Fire Dance—specifically the Crow Dance.³⁴⁹

The first dance was the Jumping Dance which featured a large drum that was heated over a fire in order to make it supple for drumming. Dancers formed a circle and took turns improvising dances in the center of the circle to the beat of the drum until the drum grew cold. The drum was then reheated and the drummers selected a new rhythm that would signal a new round of dancing. In the second part of the Fire Dance cycle called the Ring Play, the dancers formed a ring with a dancer in the center. This dancer chose a partner and performed a sensual dance. The final dance in the cycle was the Crow Dance, a solo dance in which the dancer imitated a flying buzzard seeking food. The dancers wore elaborate costumes that were created to represent humans, birds, animals and trees—a celebration of nature awakening in spring.

In an article Humphrey wrote for the *American Dancer* about her work in *Run, Little Chillun*, she also described the Jumping Dance.³⁵⁰ Perhaps more telling is a handwritten manuscript titled “Bahama Fire Dance” found in the Doris Humphrey Collection at the New York Public Library.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Kraut, 188.

³⁵⁰ Kraut, 189; Doris Humphrey, “Dance, Little Chillun!” *American Dancer* 6 (July 1933): 8.

³⁵¹ “Bahama Fire Dance” Doris Humphrey Collection, Performing Arts Research Collections-Dance Division, The New York Public Library. Kraut, 188.

Kraut mentions this manuscript, citing it as proof that Humphrey knew of Hurston's work with the Bahamian Dancers and the two performances of *The Great Day*. Kraut also states that it is possible the manuscript was a draft of Humphrey's article for *American Dancer*—an article in which she omitted any acknowledgement of Hurston's work.³⁵² However, this manuscript along with yet another titled "John Dowason [sic] and Leonard Stirrup 'Bahama fire dance'" show that Humphrey received a detailed written account of the Jumping Dance from Hurston's dancers.³⁵³

We know little about John Dawson except that after the January performance of the Great Day, Dawson kept the dancers' costumes and most likely used them in subsequent Fire Dance performances.³⁵⁴ Leonard Stirrup, on the other hand, was a tap dancer of some renown who went by the stage name of "Motorboat."³⁵⁵ Both Dawson and Stirrup capitalized on their experience with Hurston and performed versions of the Bahamian Fire Dance in venues such as the Cotton Club where they were billed as African dancers. Although written with very poor grammar and spelling, the detail in their description of the dance indicates that they are recounting what Hurston taught them about the dance cycle—not actually how they performed the dance in *The Great Day* (for example, they mention that the dance continues for about four hours and they certainly did not perform the Jumping Dance for four hours in Hurston's review). Also, the existence of Dawson and Stirrup's letter shows that Humphrey (or whoever actually wrote the cleaned-up version) only edited the grammar and their account for the *American Dancer* article. No citation or credit was given to Stirrup or Dawson in the cleaner version or in the *American Dancer* article. This strongly suggests

³⁵² Humphrey, 8. Also mentioned in Kraut, 189.

³⁵³ John Dowason [sic] and Leonard Stirrup "Bahama Fire Dance" Doris Humphrey Collection, Performing Arts Research Collections-Dance Division, The New York Public Library.

³⁵⁴ Kraut, 161.

³⁵⁵ Kraut 257n43.

that Humphrey was taught the dances from Hurston's review by the Bahamian Dancers and arranged them to fit the plot of *Run, Little Chillun*. As a white dancer and choreographer of some renown, she was in a position to take full credit with no questions asked.³⁵⁶

We do not know who choreographed the other dances in the scene before the Bahamian Fire Dancers. A solo, not included in the script and danced by Mother Kanda (which could have replaced the solo danced by Reba described in the script) could have been choreographed by Hurston, Olga Burgoyne (who performed this dance in the 1933 production), Humphrey, or even a collaboration between Humphrey and Burgoyne. Burgoyne was not associated with Hurston's Bahamian Dancers before her involvement in *Run, Little Chillun*. She was a seasoned actress and solo dancer in the groundbreaking African American concert dance company founded by Hemsley Winfield.³⁵⁷ Winfield's company, the New Negro Art Theater Dance Group, was sponsored by Ruth St. Denis of the Denishawn Company, the same company which gave Humphrey her start.³⁵⁸ Winfield's company performed in Louis Gruenberg's Metropolitan Opera production of *Emperor Jones* in 1933 and Burgoyne left her role as a dancer in the production to join the cast of *Run, Little Chillun*.³⁵⁹

Burgoyne's solo is detailed in an article in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, revealing one black journalist's determination to view some aspect of this scene as authentic. The reviewer writes, "With erect torso she sways from side to side, hypnotically, with a monotonous rhythm which increases to

³⁵⁶ Carol Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 162-164. Humphrey's plagiarizing of Hurston's choreography is similar to George Balanchine's almost exclusive use of Katherine Dunham's choreography in the staged version of *Cabin in the Sky* (1940). As in *Run, Little Chillun*, Dunham did not receive any credit for her choreography for *Cabin in the Sky*.

³⁵⁷ Manning, 32.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 36.

a sharp staccato, while the chanting and deep booming of drums rise strangely, weirdly. It evokes a beauty of half-forgotten things, rhythms remembered from long-ago ancestors.”³⁶⁰ The reviewer seemed to believe there was an authentic link between this choreography and the performances and dances of ancestors, whether Africans, West Indians, or general Afro-Diaspora ancestors. The primary reason for the reviewer’s assumption that the choreography evoked long-ago ancestors seems to have been based on general ideas of primitivism because the dance was hypnotic, weird and beautiful.

In a review of *Run, Little Chillun* for the New York Times, the dance critic John Martin claimed that African American dancers are incapable of refined “dances designed for another race,” but choreography that appealed to their “natural” instincts such as the dancing in the New Day Pilgrim scene—of which he gives full choreographic credit to Doris Humphrey—is where they excel. He explains, “The wild revel which ends the scene owes to Miss Humphrey the fact that it looks as if it had not been staged at all, which is the highest praise for any sort of folk dancing across a set of footlights. It has, however, been pruned extensively and given a rude form, without which it would presumably go on indefinitely until the dancers dropped from exhaustion.”³⁶¹ He continues to praise Humphrey for her choreography, which he notes is based on authentic folk material from the Bahamas. As Kraut has pointed out, this statement is inherently racist, revealing the widely held belief that African American dancers could only perform these allegedly authentic primitive dances.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ Malcolm B. Fulcher, “Olga Burgoyne Danced Before Royalty, Now in Broadway Play,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Apr. 1, 1933. See also, John O. Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 77.

³⁶¹ John Martin, “The Dance: A Negro Play: Work of Doris Humphrey in ‘Run, Little Chillun’ Merits Praise,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1933.

³⁶² Kraut, 189-92.

The rest of the article, however, has been overlooked in scholarship. It articulates what Martin perceived to be a problematic discrepancy between the presentation of the New Day Pilgrim cult's songs, the speech by Brother Moses, and the wild dancing that ensued. Claiming that Johnson created the cult "out of thin air," he points out the incongruity between the articulate speech of the educated Brother Moses and the "barbaric" dancing. The style of Brother Moses's speech, which was in stark contrast to the stereotypical dialect spoken by the Hope Baptists, constituted a significant departure from representations of African Americans in other theatrical works of the period, which evidently disturbed Martin. According to Martin, Brother Moses's speech,

is not essentially Negroid, philosophical doctrines in three-syllable words with more than ordinary punctiliousness about subordinate clauses and other grammatical niceties not usually to be found in colloquial speech, yet he views with equanimity and even with apparent approval his followers' barbaric physical excesses. The two points of view must, for the sake of the play, be welded into one, and the brunt of the welding falls upon Miss Humphrey.³⁶³

Martin's distinction between the dance and the speech seems to signal a discomfort with merging what is viewed as primitive and therefore authentic, as opposed to what reflects education and consequently, is viewed as inauthentic. He was not the only one to be disturbed by this apparent incongruity. Carl Carmer, a white author of works that focused on Americana and American folklore, wrote that while the depiction of the Hope Baptists was realistic and praiseworthy, the "newly invented intellectualized Pagan sect" was not "factual" and "thereby sacrificed that most valuable quality of good drama—conviction." He also did not think that the dance solos were believable, attributing this to Doris Humphrey's choreography, but when the Bahamian Dancers

'let go' in primitive and savage abandon...one is suddenly swept away into a maelstrom of elemental emotion. The mood of this finale is as evidently and fundamentally right as that which preceded it is evidently wrong. The mad sexual dancing answering to the syndicated beating of the tom-toms brings the act to an

³⁶³ Martin, "The Dance: A Negro Play."

orgiastic climax that is irresistibly stirring. Had it followed a convincing scene in familiar circumstances the play would have gained immeasurably in effectiveness.³⁶⁴

That these reviewers readily enjoyed the more “savage” and “primitive” aspects of the scene, while bothered by the “intellectualized” Brother Moses, highlights the complexity of both representing an educated black man (a representation that could be considered propaganda in the art vs. propaganda debate) while also portraying vaguely Africanized primitivisms.

Seemingly unfazed by Martin’s disparaging comments about an educated black male character, black reviewers were quick to point out Martin’s racism in claiming that the dancers were inexperienced, using Olga Burgoyne as their prime example.³⁶⁵ In an extensive article by Ralph Matthews in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Matthews directly took on John Martin’s review and pointed out that blacks were capable of performing dances designed for another race. To substantiate this point, his article showcased African American dancers who were proving that they were capable of more than the Charleston, Blackbottom, and Snakehips—popular African American dances of the period.³⁶⁶ The article includes pictures of Miss Honey Brown, who introduced ballet pointe dancing in a Harlem nightclub during the Charleston craze, and The Mason Sisters from Baltimore who were classical ballet dancers.³⁶⁷ He also discusses the dance in *Emperor Jones* and *Run, Little Chillun* claiming,

There is nothing distinctly Negroid about the dances featured in these two productions, as Negroid dances are accepted in America. These new forms of

³⁶⁴ Carl Carmer, ““Run, Little Chillun!” A Critical Review,” *Opportunity*, April 1933.

³⁶⁵ Fulcher, Olga Burgoyne Danced Before Royalty, Now in Broadway Play.” Chappy Gardner, “Hall Johnson Docks Choir Duties; Sails Into Dramas: And ‘Run, Little Chillun’ is The Result of Trip,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1933.

³⁶⁶ Ralph Matthews, “The Dance Puts on the Ritz,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 8, 1933. The subtitle box reads: “The Charleston, Blackbottom, and Snakehips Routed from Broadway by New Interpretative Dances Seen in “The Emperor Jones,” and “Run, Little Chillun!” Classy Artists Now Coming into Their Own as the New Medium Brings Recognition for Suppressed Talents.”

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

aesthetic entertainment lean more toward the creative and interpretive than toward the carefree folk dances exemplified in the Charleston and black bottom, attributed to us as a natural heritage.

He posits that these popular dances, “perhaps have a distant Afric [sic] origin and can be traced to the dark continent by those more familiar with the basic rhythms, they savor more of the religious ceremonies of the islanders.”³⁶⁸

Portraying the Christianity of Negro Folk Culture

Like the closing scene of the first act, *Run, Little Chillin'*'s finale exploits expectations of what was deemed authentic Negro folk culture. In this scene, Johnson dramatizes the revival meeting held at Hope Baptist in the midst of a terrible thunderstorm. He re-constructs a Southern Baptist church-revival service featuring diegetic choral performances of hymns and spirituals. When Elder Jones preaches about the parable of the lost sheep—a parable about a shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in his flock to find one that has been lost—Sulamai enters the church in the middle of his sermon, prompting Elder Jones to change the tone of his message to one of wrath, hell-fire, and brimstone. Sulamai becomes uncomfortable and escapes the church into the now raging thunderstorm and Jim rushes out to see her. Worried that they are once again losing Jim to Sulamai, the congregation begins praying and Elder Jones expresses remorse for his harsh message, praying for her salvation as well. When Jones's prayer turns to one of forgiveness, Jim returns to the church and repents at the mourner's bench while the congregation sings “Oh, Lord Have Mercy On Me.” Sulamai eventually returns, Jim cries out her name, and they dramatically run towards each other and embrace for a moment until Sulamai breaks away and runs towards the door.³⁶⁹ However, about three-quarters of

³⁶⁸ Ibid. He is also careful to point out that the choreography for *Emperor Jones* is of Haitian origins, praising the work of African American choreographer Hemsley Winfield.

³⁶⁹ Johnson, 273-279.

the way down the aisle, a flash of lightning and clap of thunder commence and Sulamai falls to the ground, dying instantly. As the congregation gasps in shock and horror over Sulamai's sudden, unexpected death, Brother Moses peers through a church window while a reminiscent strain of Pilgrim music is played offstage.

The scene mixed realism with a carefully crafted Negro folk culture, making it even more complicated than the New Day Pilgrim celebration. Despite the performance of what Hurston termed "Neo-spirituals," many reviewers praised the finale of the second act for its authenticity. Chappy Gardner wrote,

So true to life, and the characters of the revival scene inject so much honest-to-goodness reality into their work that many in the audience about me found themselves completely controlled by the spirit of the play. I found it hard to keep from joining in the singing of the old spirituals and hymns sung by my mother and hers—and now given more artistic fullness and appreciation by Hall Johnson's masterful direction.

Gardner claimed that *Run, Little Chillun* was "an authentic history of a great people in the raw."³⁷⁰

Like Gardner, Morton Eustis, white theater critic of *Theater Arts Monthly*, explicitly linked primitivism and authenticity in *Run, Little Chillun*:

Mr. Johnson and his fellows recreated effectively the life of the primitive Negro at moments of high emotional tension. A revival meeting in a small Negro church in the South was so true and so stirringly expressed that it took the audience completely out of the theatre into the black belt... The revival scene repeated an event which transpires in any primitive Negro community in the South...³⁷¹

The conflation of primitive and authentic by Gardner and Eustis is yet another example of how Negro folk culture—in this case, Negro religious practices—were defined not just by white cultural "outsiders," but by educated African Americans who promoted Negro folk culture as the basis of

³⁷⁰ Chappy Gardner, "Hall Johnson Docks Choir Duties; Sails Into Dramas: And 'Run, Little Chillun' Is the Result of Trip." *The Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1933.

³⁷¹ Morton Eustis, "The Optimist on Broadway," *Theater Arts Monthly*, March, 1933.

American culture. “The Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy”— the admirable primitive African retentions in African American Christianity that Du Bois asserted were the essential elements of the black church tradition were dramatized in the finale of *Run, Little Chillun* and Hall Johnson claimed that the final scene was an attempt to “work out in dramatic form the community background in which Negro spirituals were born.”³⁷²

The stage director, Frank Merlin, a white actor and seasoned director of several Broadway plays, claimed that he attended “scores and scores of actual revivals when I was a young man.” He also directed religious revival scenes in other productions.³⁷³ Because the Hall Johnson Choir was already rehearsing *Run, Little Chillun* before Merlin’s involvement, he observed their rehearsal of the scene and then “mixed with them, and what I thought was important to the audience I retained, making elisions, going over what they said with a fine toothcomb. First I let them go wild. Then I found out what could be used. Then I set the lines, holding them rigidly.”³⁷⁴ He described having to restrain the actors from too much ad-lib because “My job was to restrain them. Thus, it is a real revival scene they give. The only thing not real is that we built it up with each hymn.”³⁷⁵ He provides a description of the staging:

With the first hymn the crowds are beginning to come in. More people enter with the second, and with the subsequent ones we have a mingling of action and talk leading to the climax of the man’s fainting and being carried out. Then we stop all the action momentarily to intensify the dramatic effect.” He attributes this staging to the critical acclaim the revival scene garnered.³⁷⁶

³⁷² “Broadway Play is Novel Production: Hall Johnson Tops Heights in Offering,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1933.

³⁷³ *Herald Tribune*, June 4, 1933; Isadora Bennett, “Merlin Duly ‘Discovered’ Fifteen Years in Theater, Director Tells Secret of Craft,” clipping, source unknown, March 12, 1933. Hall Johnson Negro Choir Clippings, Performing Arts Research Collections-Music Division, The New York Public Library.

³⁷⁴ “Director Tells Secret of Craft”

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

As in a real church revival, the songs grew spontaneously out of prayers, testimonies, and sermons. The example below provides a visual outline of the events in this scene, illustrating how the singing and praying were interchangeable: congregants and church leaders sang songs as their prayers or as part of their prayer [see Table 1.2]. Testimonies begin with songs that are relevant to the congregant's testimony. In addition to this, Johnson indicates in the script that the sermon delivered by Elder Jones and the prayer by Sister Luella Strong were intoned—a dramatic sing-speech that usually begins with formal, measured phrasing and escalates to what musicologist William Dargan describes as “celebratory gestures of intoned speech.”³⁷⁷ There was also an active Amen Corner—a group of congregants that lead others in responses to sermons, prayers, and testimonies by shouting “amen,” “preach it,” etc...

³⁷⁷ William Dargan, *Lining Out the Word: Dr. Watts Hymn Singing In The Music of Black Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 163-4.

Table 1.2. Outline of Songs and Events in Finale of *Run, Little Chillun*

1. A woman kneeling at mourners bench hums **“Steal Away”**
2. Rev. Ebenezer Allen lines out **“Amazing Grace”** (hymn) as church fills up—as congregants come, they join in the singing and more voices are added.
3. Sister Luella Strong from Mobile Alabama leads the congregation in prayer, beginning her prayer by singing **“Oh, Jesus, come dis-a-way!”**
4. Testimony time interspersed with songs—two congregants begin their testimony with songs and then tell their testimony; Brother Absalom Brown, a veteran Christian, sings **“Done written Down-a My Name”** and new convert Minnie Williams sings **“Is Dere Anybody Here Dat Loves My Jesus.”** The final testimony is Ella’s (she’s the only one that does not sing).
5. **Jim enters the church and sits beside Ella.** The congregation sings **“Run, Little Chillun,”** then Elder Jones preaches.
6. Jim throws himself at the mourner’s bench asking congregation to pray. Congregation sings/prays **“Lord, Have Mercy.”**
7. Jim sings **“So Glad.”**
8. Jim lines out the hymn **“Return oh holy dove, return sweet messenger of Rest”** (hymn).

When the scene opens, congregants are kneeling at the mourner’s bench (a bench at the front of church where people go to pray and often repent from sin), some are prostrate on the floor.

The primary focus is on a woman, kneeling at the bench and humming the spiritual “Steal Away” as people filter into the church. Singing hymns or spirituals as prayers is a common practice in many black Baptist churches, and Johnson demonstrates this in three crucial moments in this scene.³⁷⁸ Through the humming and singing of spirituals or hymns as part of a prayer, Johnson shows the highly personal nature of these songs and how they were sung during worship services. When Reverend Sister Luella Strong, an evangelist from Mobile Alabama who was visiting Hope Baptist, leads the congregation in a prayer, she begins by singing the spiritual “O Jesus come dis a way.” This kind of prayer encourages congregants to participate actively in the prayer—an act of agreement where, in this case, the congregation collectively asks for Jesus’s presence to be in the midst of their service. After Sister Luella Strong was finished singing the spiritual, Johnson notes in the script that congregants continued to hum the song while the Reverend prayed, which is also a common practice in black Baptist churches.³⁷⁹ When Jim throws himself at the mourners’ bench, dramatically and publically repenting for his transgressions with Sulamai, he asks the congregation to pray for his soul, and the entire congregation sings “O Lord, Have Mercy on Me.” In a sense, the congregation helps Jim articulate his own prayer of repentance by singing “Oh, Lord have mercy on me, on me,/Oh, Lord have mercy on me, I’m gonna fall down on my knees/And I’m gonna face de risin’ sun.” In the script, Johnson indicates that this song should have “the sound of prayer and supplication—in shrill, high voices of old women, resonant, deep-throated tones from men...”³⁸⁰ The congregation continues to sing the spiritual, supporting Jim in his prayers until he is so invigorated by his sense of repentance and redemption that he rises with a shout from the mourners’ bench and leads the congregation in the spiritual “So Glad.”

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 25 & 142.

³⁷⁹ Ibid. 142.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 277.

An aspect of traditional black Baptist worship was the practice of lining out hymns. In *Run, Little Chillun*, the hymns “Amazing Grace,” which is sung as congregants filter into the church, and “Return Oh Holy Dove,” which is the very last song of the drama, are lined out. Lining out is an oral tradition of hymn-singing practiced by black Baptists in the United States in a call-and-response format. A hymn text is chanted by a worship leader in a slow tempo with syllables often drawn out and embellished with improvised melismas, and at times, melismatic moans.³⁸¹ The congregation then responds, often repeating some form of the improvisation sung by the worship leader. Although this tradition has its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth century worship practice of the protestant group, English Dissenters, the adaptation of this practice by slaves, which has been passed down for generations, bears little audible resemblance to its forbears.³⁸² The lined-out version is almost unrecognizable in comparison to the hymnal version. “Amazing Grace” is one of the traditional hymns that are lined out in the black Missionary Baptist tradition.³⁸³ By including lined-out hymns in this scene along with Negro spirituals as they would be sung in a church service, Johnson provided a replica of a worship service as it would actually have been experienced at a real revival meeting.

Though many parts of this scene attempted to show how Negro spirituals were sung in religious worship settings, the title spiritual “*Run, Little Chillun*” was actually composed by Johnson. This was an opportunity for Johnson to demonstrate his ability to compose in the manner of a Negro spiritual according to his notions of authenticity. The Hall Johnson choir recorded this song in 1939, making it possible to listen for those elements that Johnson claimed could only be captured

³⁸¹ Ibid., 26.

³⁸² For an example of how Amazing Grace is traditionally lined out in a north-central Piedmont, South Carolina church, see transcriptions in Dargan, 68, 79.

³⁸³ Ibid., 27.

on recording.³⁸⁴ The song is sung after Ella (Jim's wife) testified to the church about her unwavering faith in God's ability to bring Jim to repentance. As if her testimony itself summoned Jim to the church, he wanders into the church as soon as she was finished speaking to the congregation and sits next to her. The congregation then sings the title song.

In the 1939 recording, a folk quality is audible as the soloist does not have an operatically trained voice. However, the choir is impeccably unified and in tune and there are no bent notes, slides, or improvisation—markers of musical authenticity that Johnson lamented were lacking in performances of spirituals (yet, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Johnson did not really include these elements in his own work or performances). Like recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir recordings, the choir and soloists sing exactly what is composed (with the exception of a few bent notes), and the counterpoint and harmony are standard fare for choral music in general. The only identifiable musical elements of a spiritual are call-and-response form, a minor, pentatonic key, and lyrics that warn the believer against the wiles of the devil.³⁸⁵ The title song is an example of how, when performed within the context of a dramatic scene, a composed spiritual could pass as an authentic Negro spiritual.

³⁸⁴ Hall Johnson, "Notes on the Negro Spiritual," in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 271-2. Bent notes, rhythmic improvisation, and "the unconscious, but amazing and bewildering counterpoint produced by so many voices in individual improvisation."

³⁸⁵ Spirituals such as: "Doncher Let nobody turn you roun!" and "You Better Min!" all have lyrics exhorting believers to avoid the temptations of the devil and stay on the "straight and narrow."

Part II: The Origins of *Run, Little Chillun* and its Cultural Climate

In 1932, while Johnson was still music director for Marc Connelly's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *The Green Pastures*, he assembled a group of about 300 unemployed singers. In an unpublished article titled "One Man Show," the author called Johnson a "little W.P.A all by himself."³⁸⁶ The choir ran a soup kitchen to feed the massive ensemble, and Johnson selected 20 singers from the group for a transcontinental fundraising tour to pay for the expenses of the choir.

A different account published in a special issue of the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that Hall Johnson expanded his choir of 20 to 175 members to perform "Let Freedom Ring," a scene that dramatized the history of African American slaves from the journey through the Middle Passage and ended with a triumphant reading of The Emancipation Proclamation at the Old Roxy on Lincoln's birthday.³⁸⁷ Afterwards, the singers refused to disband and rehearsals continued, leading to the creation of *Run, Little Chillun*.³⁸⁸ Although there are obvious discrepancies between these stories, it is true that because of the widespread fame and success of the Hall Johnson Choir and the more recent success of *The Green Pastures*, "half of Harlem wanted to join" the cast of *Run, Little Chillun*.³⁸⁹ Throughout his career, Johnson constantly received letters and requests from black performing artists who hoped they could join his choir, believing it offered not only employment but also a chance at success in the performing world. The requests to join the Hall Johnson Choir were

³⁸⁶ N.a. "One Man Show" letter with letterhead from the Federal Theatre Projects, Los Angeles, n.d., Hall Johnson Collection, quoted in Simpson 174-5. The original source and date of the clipping are not clear.

³⁸⁷ Simpson, 7.

³⁸⁸ "Johnson Fed Singers for Months Before Producing Broadway Hit," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 8, 1933.

³⁸⁹ "One Man Show"

especially overwhelming during the Depression when jobs were hard to come by, especially for artists.³⁹⁰

According to both accounts, Johnson wrote the music and sketches of *Run, Little Chillun* in order to keep the choir of unemployed, eager performing artists occupied. Johnson stated, “I tried to find someone to write the script for it, but they all looked at the sketches and told me I had better do it myself.”³⁹¹ Without any promise of the play ever being performed, his choir rehearsed *Run, Little Chillun* and Johnson noted, “It’s the only time I ever heard of 300 people rehearsing a play before they had any expectation of having it produced.”³⁹² Just when they were about to run out of resources, the established entertainment lawyer, Robert Rockmore, became interested in the project, and after seeing a rehearsal, decided to produce the play.³⁹³

Run, Little Chillun* as a Critical Response to Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures

An important inspiration for *Run, Little Chillun* was Johnson’s involvement as music director in *The Green Pastures* that ran on Broadway for 18 months. The show then toured the U.S. for five years. Warner Brothers purchased the film rights in June, 1935 and produced the movie the following year. Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures* is greatly indebted to a book titled *Ol’ Man Adam an’ his Chillun* written by a white New Orleans journalist, Roark Bradford.³⁹⁴ Bradford’s book was based on Old Testament stories as he imagined rural Louisiana blacks would interpret them.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ “One Man Show,” Simpson, 175.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Hall Johnson, introduction to *The Green Pastures Spirituals Arranged for Voice and Piano* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930), v-vi.

Consequently, *The Green Pastures*, like *Ol' Man Adam an' his Chillun*, portrayed blacks as “charmingly” ignorant and religious.

Negro spirituals were interspersed throughout *The Green Pastures*. Usually they appeared at scene changes but also during a few scenes to add dramatic effect.³⁹⁵ In this way, *The Green Pastures* further contributed to an increasingly popular element in theater: the incorporation and dramatization of Negro spirituals in plays. In a play in only two acts and eighteen scenes, there are over twenty-five spirituals all sung a cappella by the Hall Johnson Choir.³⁹⁶ In the introduction to a collection of spirituals sung in the play reduced for piano and solo voice and published in 1930, Johnson wrote favorably of his involvement in the production. He believed that *The Green Pastures* provided “the opportunity our Choir had been waiting for” to perform Negro folk music in a large-scale dramatic work and was “increasingly anxious to start immediately to work on the musical side of this wonderful play.”³⁹⁷ In an effort to assure the reader of the accuracy and authenticity of the music, he explained that he did extensive research in order to find the correct version of each spiritual to fit every scene of the play and even composed the music for the Babylonian Cabaret scene. He also exclaimed,

To me it seemed that the play grew into the songs and again that the songs grew back into the play, so unmistakably were both permeated by similar dramatic essence, whether sung or spoken. Back stage on the opening night the fervor of the response of the audience seemed to me surpassed by the emotional intensity of the cast and the Choir. It was as though an emotional spark of these negro performers had been fanned into flame by the still warm breath of their ancestors.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures* (New York: Reinhart, 1929).

³⁹⁶ Simpson, 174.

³⁹⁷ Johnson, *Green Pastures*, introduction, v.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

However, Johnson does mention that black opinions of *The Green Pastures* varied between those who view it as “a beautifully organized ritual which brings human thought to a nearer contemplation of divinity” and those who felt that it presented the religious faith of blacks as childish, only reinforcing whites’ feelings of superiority.³⁹⁹ Yet Johnson concludes,

For myself, after eight months of familiar acquaintance with “The Green Pastures,” I still feel that Marc Connelly has written the finest dramatic expression, so far, of the spirit that imbues the Negro Spirituals; and that that spirit of proud humility, of unswerving determination, of unalterable love, is the finest that could possibly sway the destinies of any people—bond or free.⁴⁰⁰

However, despite Johnson’s overwhelming support of Connelly’s *Green Pastures*, some scholars have speculated that Johnson created *Run, Little Chillun* as a response to *Green Pastures*, in an effort to accurately portray the religious lives of African Americans. Judith Weisenfeld posits that Johnson wrote *Run, Little Chillun* as a corrective answer to *Green Pastures* because he felt that the portrayal of black people in Connelly’s play—especially their religious practices—was degrading, describing it as a “white-washed burlesque of the religious thought of the Negro.”⁴⁰¹ This direct quote is from Johnson’s letter to an MGM producer written in 1943 (several years after the film version of the play was produced in 1936) and a larger portion of the letter is included in Weisenfeld’s article. What caused the change in Johnson’s opinion—at least the public version of his opinion—is unknown. It is likely that Johnson saw an opportunity to write an even better version of a drama that portrays “the spirit that imbues the Negro Spirituals.”⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Ibid., vi.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Weisenfeld, 44.

⁴⁰² Johnson, *Green Pastures*, introduction, vi.

As one of the most popular folk plays by a white playwright that showcased Negro spirituals, Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* reflected a trend that had been growing among playwrights since the 1920s. During this period, white American playwrights became increasingly interested in theatrical works that glorified the folk—especially the Negro folk. English literature scholar Brenda Murphy notes that this interest in the folk was concurrent with the growth of cultural anthropology and the study of folklore at American universities.⁴⁰³ For example, professors of dramatic literature such as Frederick Koch encouraged his students to write simple plays about the American folk. One of his most successful students was Paul Green, Pulitzer Prize winner of *In Abraham's Bosom* in 1926. *In Abraham's Bosom* was set in rural North Carolina and dealt with the issues of miscegenation and the plight of the “tragic mulatto.” The general message of the play is that a mixed-race person will always be tormented by an ongoing inner battle between their primitive, violent (read: black) side and their more intelligent (read: white) side. In Green's play, the primitive, violent side won. Another example of one of the many folk plays about African Americans written by white American playwrights is DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's play *Porgy* (1927), which was based on Heyward's novel of the same name. It was a love story between a beggar and prostitute in an impoverished black community in Charleston South Carolina set in the then recent past.⁴⁰⁴

A prominent feature of these, and almost every, Negro folk play of the 1920s-30s was the singing of Negro spirituals and other African American songs, which were usually featured in scenes depicting the religious activities of blacks. This trend was also reflected in films such as King Vidor's 1929 *Hallelujah!*, which incorporated spirituals that were sung by all-black choirs. Even classical

⁴⁰³Brenda Murphy, “Folk Plays” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre 1st ed. Vol 2.* ed Don Wilmet, Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: 1999. Cambridge Histories Online, accessed November 21, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521651790>), 307-311.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

composers like Louis Gruenberg dramatized the Negro spiritual “It’s Me Oh Lord, Standin in the Need of Prayer” in his opera, *Emperor Jones* (1933), which was based on Eugene O’Neill’s play of the same name from 1920. Successful folk plays by white playwrights from the 1920s were adapted for film and became equally successful movies and operas during the 1930s (ex: *Emperor Jones* starring Paul Robeson and *The Green Pastures*, George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* and Louis Gruenberg’s *Emperor Jones*) is a testament to their enduring audience appeal. In an article promoting the folk drama genre as a solution to a perceived lack of original dramas in 1933, a critic of the *Chicago Defender* defines the folk drama genre as “a combination of opera” because of the prominence of Negro spirituals in these dramatic works.⁴⁰⁵

Is *Run, Little Chillun* on the “Art” or “Propaganda” side of the New Negro Art versus Propaganda Debate?

Johnson’s play was not only a response to *The Green Pastures*, but to the genre of “folk plays” as represented by both white and black playwrights. His play portrayed New Negro ideals and straddled the arbitrary art versus propaganda debate as outlined by Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. Johnson utilized several aspects of primitivism and Negro folk culture that New Negro artists, inspired by Locke’s brand of primitivist modernism, employed in their works. With the vague Africanisms in the New Day Pilgrim’s music, theology, and dance, and the portrayal of the constructed Negro folk who were Southern, rural, uneducated, and religious, *Run, Little Chillun* is a drama that adheres to Locke’s call for plays that capture what he considered to be the “Negro spirit” in a non-confrontational manner.

⁴⁰⁵ Al Monroe, “Singing on Stage: Box Office Sadly in Need of Ideas, Say Theater Critics,” *Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1933. Traces the history of performance of spirituals from Fisk Jubilee and Williams Jubilee Singers, to soloists like Robeson, Black Patti, Roland Hayes, Jules Bledsoe, to early talkies that featured the HJ choir, to all-black cast movies.

Locke's advocacy for use of European primitivist modernism in drama began during his tenure at Howard University where he founded a theatre program in 1921 along with his colleague Montgomery T. Gregory. Professors Locke and Gregory encouraged students to write folk plays that portrayed the "uncurled almost naïve reflection of the poetry and folk feeling of a people who have after all a different soul and temperament from that of the smug, unimaginative industrialist and the self-righteous and inhibited Puritan."⁴⁰⁶ Strategically using racial essentialism, Locke believed that the Negro temperament "moves natively and spontaneously in the world of make-believe with primitive power of imaginative abandon and emotional conviction."⁴⁰⁷ He asserted that the portrayal of this temperament was going to bring back the "renewing, elemental powers of early drama" and challenge what he described as "generations of enforced buffoonery and caricature."⁴⁰⁸

Locke encouraged his students to avoid writing dramas that explicitly dealt with socio-political issues claiming that plays were "not meant to solve problems or reform society."⁴⁰⁹ According to Locke, black dramatists and artists should not create work that was protest art or propaganda.⁴¹⁰ That is, it was not to be art that was confrontational in nature, exposing socio-economic and racial injustices, but it was to prove to whites that blacks were fully human. He famously asserted:

My chief objection to propaganda...is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of

⁴⁰⁶ Locke, Introduction: The Drama of Negro Life, in *Plays of Negro Life: A Source Book of Native American Drama* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), 5; Murphy, 308-9.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. See also Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings 1898-1965* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2011), 58. As Miller notes, as early as 1923, Locke was saying "it is not the business of plays to solve problems or to reform society."

⁴¹⁰ Locke, "Art or Propaganda?" in *Harlem* 1(1928): 12-13.

a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates.... In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression – in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda.⁴¹¹

One of his primary opponents was Du Bois, who voiced his disapproval of Locke's rejection of political engagement in plays. Du Bois felt that Locke's emphasis on art for arts sake was purposeless. However, Du Bois pointed out that *The New Negro*, Locke's crowning achievement of the 1920s, "is a book filled and bursting with propaganda... and it is a grave question if ever in this world in any renaissance there can be a search for disembodied beauty which is not really a passionate effort to do something tangible, accompanied and illumined and made holy by the vision of eternal beauty."⁴¹² Therefore, Du Bois concluded that Locke's thesis was flawed and the art vs. propaganda debate was a false dichotomy. Du Bois believed that all good art—specifically art produced by African Americans—would contribute to challenging or demolishing some socio-political stereotype or injustice, whether indirectly or directly. Propaganda, to Du Bois, meant promoting the idea that blacks were deserving of the right to enjoy life, and all purposeful artistic work by African Americans would accomplish this.

For Du Bois, one means of propaganda was promoting an image of educated, respectable, accomplished blacks. He wanted to portray an image of blacks that helped audiences understand that black people were deserving of civil rights, or as he poetically declared, "the right of black folk to love and enjoy." To this end, Du Bois devoted tremendous effort to advocating for more representations of accomplished blacks. Du Bois published another, more popular article in *Crisis* titled "Criteria of Negro Art." In this article, he famously proclaimed that

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹² W.E.B. Du Bois, "Our Book Shelf," *Crisis* 31 (January 1926), 141 reprinted in Fraden, 63.

damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.⁴¹³

In the above quote, the side that Du Bois feared would be “stripped and silent” was the representation of educated upper- and middle-class blacks. Although Du Bois encouraged black playwrights to “tell the truth,” he wanted them to write about educated and accomplished blacks because he feared that Locke’s ideals could be misconstrued as a license to perpetuate stereotypes of lower class blacks.⁴¹⁴ He attributed the lure of depicting the less “respectable” aspects of blacks’ experience in America to the hardships black artists faced when attempting to publish, display, or produce their works. In “Criteria for Negro Art,” Du Boise asserted that “We must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment. And we are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body, and just of soul to all men.”⁴¹⁵ To this end, he helped to establish the Krigwa Little Theater Movement in Harlem in 1926 to promote folk plays created to educate the African-American people. Sponsored by *Crisis*, the name Krigwa was an acronym for Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists (the C in *Crisis* was changed to a K). In his famous essay on the subject, DuBois stated that a “real Negro theater” should be “About us, By us, For us, and Near us.... only in this way can a real folk-play movement of American Negroes be built up.”⁴¹⁶ This Negro theater favored a black nationalism that was based on racial separatism because Du Bois believed that “a Negro play that will interest us and depict our life, experience, and humor, cannot be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer.” If it could be sold to a Broadway producer, Du Bois

⁴¹³ Du Bois “Criteria for Negro Art,” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290-297.

⁴¹⁴ See discussion in Miller, 68.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁴¹⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre,” *The Crisis* 32 (July 1926): 134-136.

insisted that it would not “be about the kind of Negro you and I know or want to know.”⁴¹⁷

However, in a symposium Du Bois published in *Crisis* titled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” (1926), he invited literary figures to answer a series of questions.⁴¹⁸ These questions led to the discussion of whether white or black playwrights or novelists would ever represent educated and accomplished blacks and what should be done if blacks were continually portrayed at their worst and subsequently judged by the public according to these fictionalized portrayals. The third question was the most revealing of Du Bois’s sentiments on the issue and one that continues to be debated today: “Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?”⁴¹⁹ The questionnaire garnered responses from white and black literary figures such as Carl Van Vechten, Langston Hughes, Sinclair Lewis, Countee Cullen and Charles Chesnutt, among others. Four of the white respondents cautioned against writing works that were propaganda, claiming that it was a sure way to lose an audience. Most (both black and white) agreed that as long as the characters were artistically and fully developed, they would find a publisher and an audience, but most of the black respondents added that choosing how to represent black characters was a serious question with political importance.⁴²⁰ DuBose Heyward, also one of the respondents, claimed that literature “by and about ‘the educated and artistic Negro . . . will find his public waiting for him when the publishers are willing to take the chance.” But that chance was not in 1926 and

⁴¹⁷ Du Bois, “Paying for Plays,” *The Crisis* 32 (November 1926): 7-8. Also quoted in Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy & Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 88.

⁴¹⁸ Du Bois “A Questionnaire” *The Crisis* 31 (February 1926): 165; “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed? A Symposium” *The Crisis* 31-33 (March-June, August, September, and November 1926).

⁴¹⁹ Du Bois “A Questionnaire.”

⁴²⁰ “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed? A Symposium” *The Crisis* 31-33 (March-June, August, September, and November 1926).

most respondents (both black and white) believed that this was because there had not yet been a work that sophisticatedly and artistically portrayed the educated Negro.⁴²¹

The belief that white American playwrights like DuBose Heyward wrote realistic Negro folk plays was clearly expressed in a compilation of plays edited by Locke and Montgomery published the following year titled *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama* (1927).⁴²² Significantly, most of the 20 works in the volume are by white American playwrights and include Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* and Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. In the introduction, Locke establishes the importance of African American culture to the creation of a genre of theatre that is distinctly American. He proclaimed that the acknowledgement of Negro folk culture by these white playwrights was leading to an establishment of an American cultural identity. Locke viewed them as pioneers in the development of the native American drama because they had a natural objectivity toward Negro life. He asserted that black playwrights need to follow their example, abandon their "puppets of protest and propaganda and take to flesh and blood characters and situations."⁴²³ Using Heyward's *Porgy* as an example, Locke stated that Heyward depicted the Negro realistically and that it was a great work of *Negro* literature. Locke was not alone in his praise of *Porgy*. Other African American authors and playwrights such as Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, and even Hall Johnson praised DuBose's character development in *Porgy*.⁴²⁴ However, Du Bois claimed that if any white author depicted their race in the way that DuBose Heyward did in *Porgy*, he would be "drummed out

⁴²¹ DuBose Heyward, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He be Portrayed?" *The Crisis* 31 (March 1926), 220.

⁴²² Alain Locke, *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama* (Westport, CN: Negro Universities Press 1927 reprinted in 1970).

⁴²³ Ibid., 5.

⁴²⁴ Countee Cullen, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" *The Crisis* (August 1926), 194; Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 2 (1933), 201; Hall Johnson: "Porgy and Bess; A Folk Opera," *Opportunity* (January, 1936), 24-28.

of town.”⁴²⁵ As he feared, according to the responses to his survey, the Negro folk (who were rural, Southern, often poor), or the urban poor (as in *Porgy*) were more desirable subjects for establishing an American drama.

Locke, who declared, “It is not the primary function of drama to reform us” because the main goals of drama were to refine and entertain, insisted that he was not promoting “art for art’s sake,” but an understanding of the transformative power of art as “psalms will be more effective than sermons.”⁴²⁶ He believed that when the racial and political climate in the nation was improved and “the problems of group adjustment are nearer resolution,” then “problem” plays and history plays would be appreciated and not reviled.⁴²⁷

Although Du Bois was not thrilled by the assumption of ignorant audience members that *Porgy* was a realistic portrayal of typical Negro life, he did praise what he deemed to be the artistic merit of the play. Similar to Hall Johnson’s glowing praise for *Porgy*, Du Bois explained,

The artist [DuBose and Dorothy Heyward] cannot be criticized simply because it is caricature, although the public and the press may certainly be criticized for saying, as many said of *Porgy*—“this is a picture of typical Negro life!” No, it was not, but it was a beautiful play. Or, if the picture of Negro life while true enough is incomplete, nevertheless, the measure of success is its artistry and not its completeness. The black world does rightly complain that white folk insist on judging art as truth and then refusing to accept or see or read any artistic work which does not portray the truth as they want it.... The difficulty, of course, with the Negro on the American stage, is that the white audience, on the one hand, demands caricatures and farces, and the Negro, on the other hand, either cringes to the demand because he needs the pay, or bitterly condemns every Negro book or show what does not paint colored folk at their best. Their criticisms should be aimed at the incompleteness of art expression at the embargo which white wealth lays on full Negro expression—and a full picturing of the Negro soul.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” 296-7.

⁴²⁶ Alain Locke, introduction to *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama*, p 5.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁴²⁸ Du Bois, “Green Pastures,” *The Crisis* (May 1930), 162, 177-8; 162.

Of *The Green Pastures*, Du Bois claimed “All these difficulties [caricatures, stereotypical portrayal of “everyday Negro life”] are being slowly overcome.”⁴²⁹ He believed that *The Green Pastures* was artistically rendered, a beautiful depiction of the folk religion of Negroes. He further explained, “Some whites will not like it because it is too human and tragic with all its humor. But more Negroes will view it aghast, because it will seem to them sacrilegious... It is the beginning of a new era, not simply in Negro art but in the art of America.”⁴³⁰

Locke also viewed *The Green Pastures* as evidence of progress in artistically portraying Negro religion, capturing some of the “true Negro peasant spirit.”⁴³¹ On the other hand, Locke disliked what he viewed as the realism of *The Green Pastures*, explaining,

Green Pastures is a controversial subject, especially among Negroes. Is it a true version of the Negro’s religion? By the warrant of the Spirituals and the characteristic Negro sermons, it is too drably realistic, and not apocalyptic enough. But it is certainly not what some have accused it of being, a white man’s version of what he thinks Negro religion ought to be.⁴³²

He continues, “And so Green Pastures, in spite of questionable detail and a generous injection of ‘Black Zionism,’ achieves spiritual representativeness of the deepest and most moving kind.”⁴³³

Locke criticized the playwrights of the folk theater movement for not being able to discern accurately “what was truly Negro, and what was merely superficially characteristic.”⁴³⁴ Although plays like *The Green Pastures* were an improvement in this area due to the “complete eclipse of the

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 162, 177-178.

⁴³¹ Alain Locke, “This Year of Grace: Outstanding Books of the year in Negro Literature,” *Opportunity* 9 (February 1931): 48-51.

⁴³² Ibid., 49.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

propaganda novel, with all the improvement of fact and attitude, the true Negro is yet to be discovered and the purest values of the Negro spirit yet to be refined out from the alloys of our present cultural currency.”⁴³⁵ He urged playwrights to “know what we mean when we talk of the Negro folk-spirit, the true Negro character, the typical Negro spirit.”⁴³⁶

Three years later, in an article ironically titled “In the Saving Grace of Realism,” Locke wrote about what he saw as continued progress “in the artistic expression of Negro life.”⁴³⁷ He stated, “the typical Negro author is no longer propagandist on the one hand or exhibitionist on the other; the average white author is now neither a hectic faddist nor a superficial or commercialized exploiter in his attitude toward Negro subject matter.”⁴³⁸ According to Locke, by 1934, art was no longer struggling with propaganda. Johnson’s artistic treatment of primitivisms and Negro folk culture in *Run, Little Chillun* promoted New Negro ideals from the 1920s while also critiquing Negro religious culture. As such, it stands as an example of the artistic progress that Locke described in his 1934 essay.

Part III: Primitivism Perceived as Authenticity in *Run, Little Chillun*

Although *Run, Little Chillun* accomplishes the artistic balance between art and propaganda, it also appealed to white audiences’ expectations of authenticity by portraying essentialisms and primitivisms that were sensational and assumed to be genuine aspects of Negro folk culture. For

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Alain Locke, “In the Saving Grace of Realism: Retrospective Review of the Negro Literature of 1933,” *Opportunity* 12 (January, 1934): 8-11, 30, 48-51.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

example, in a *New York Times* article, Carl Van Vechten, the photographer, writer, and patron of many African American artists involved in the Harlem Renaissance, urged people to see *Run, Little Chillun* proclaiming that it would be unfortunate if the economic depression curtailed the long run he believed the show deserved.⁴³⁹ He addresses criticisms of the play's dramatic sections by describing them as "typically Negro... If it sounds naïve at the moment, recall how the paintings of Louis Eilshemus (who now hangs in the Metropolitan) looked to you a few seasons ago." In short, Van Vechten's explanation was that what others perceived as weakness in the plot, was actually a primitiveness akin to naïve art (a genre of art characterized by childlikeness, simplicity, and primitivism for which Louis Eilshemus and Henri Rousseau were famous).⁴⁴⁰ According to Van Vechten, *because Run, Little Chillun* is childlike, simple, and primitive, it is Negro, and will, in time, be appreciated.

Van Vechten claimed that the final scenes in both acts are really what "will make the success of the piece with the public." Using the language of primitivism, he described the New Day Pilgrim scene as "a weirdly erotic beauty and a crescendo of action which enkindle the imagination to a high degree."⁴⁴¹ The Hope Baptist Church revival scene was "so real in every frenzied gesture that for those of us who have participated in such camp-meeting moments the only comparison that must be made is that the singing is vastly better than the singing you could hear at an actual revival." Because of the primitiveness of the first finale, the authenticity of the second, and the overall spectacle of them both, Van Vechten concludes,

⁴³⁹ Carl Van Vechten, "On 'Run, Little Chillun!'" *New York Times*, Mar 19, 1933.

⁴⁴⁰ "naïve art," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed December 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t4/e1136>).

⁴⁴¹ "N.Y. Critics Praise 'Run, Little Chillun': Van Vechten Thinks Even The Depression Should Spare Hit," *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1933.

These two scenes, staged with an atmosphere, an authority and an instinct for the handling of masses that are extremely provocative, may be observed and listened to in precisely the same spirit in which one would attend a performance by the Russian Ballet or of a Wagnerian music drama.

This statement encapsulates the achievement of the New Negro ideal of employing racial essentialisms and appealing to the public's appetite for primitivisms in order to create art that achieves the same status as high European art.

Carl Van Vechten's seal of approval encouraged black journalists, and his *New York Times* article was reprinted in full without any criticism in the *Chicago Defender*. An introduction to Van Vechten's article reiterates excitement and high hopes for this play, exclaiming, "Not since the arrival of 'The Green Pastures'... has this city been so excited over a play..."⁴⁴²

However, what seemed to be lost on reviewers, including Van Vechten, was how the educated Brother Moses and certain aspects of the theology of the New Day Pilgrims subtly challenge some stereotypes and promote black empowerment. These aspects of the music drama made Johnson's play one that actually straddles the art versus propaganda divide. Swept away by the spectacle of each finale, journalists and theater critics did not seem to recognize that it was possibly Elder Tongola who exacted revenge on Sulamai and not the Christian God. Instead, they focused on the spectacle of the finales, many insisting on the authenticity of both scenes, some even claiming that they achieved the status of high art. For example, one reviewer for the *Chicago Defender* went as far as describing the dances explicitly as realistic, claiming, "the group of Bahama dancers break into authentic dances of Pagan abandon and beauty."⁴⁴³ This reviewer also provides a history of vodun ceremonial drums, including details on how they are made, dedicated, etc., because the Rada ceremonial drum, "Sainte Antoine," was used in the New Day Pilgrim scene. Though the author

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ "Run, Little Chillun' Has Dancing As Well As Song," *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1933.

notes that the New Day Pilgrim's philosophy is very different from actual vodun, he points out the similarity in nature worship, pantheism, and the dancing. "...there is abandoned dancing as the 'Lots' or spirit is supposed to descend and enter the bodies of individuals who become 'possessed.' This is a signal to others that the Gods are appeased; all join the ritualistic dancing reaching a state of wild exultation."⁴⁴⁴

The reviewers' insistence on drawing parallels between vodun and the New Day Pilgrims reflects the sense of solidarity that many African Americans found in Haitian culture. Since Haiti gained its independence in 1803, the Haitian Revolution had been a source of pride for African Americans. Frederick Douglass referred to Haiti as the "modern land of Caanan," and African American intellectuals such as Zora Neale Hurston believed that Haitian culture affirmed a shared African past and solidarity with slavery in the Americas. "Anthropological imagination" led to the belief that Haitian culture was synonymous with African culture. When combined with the colonial and imperial discourse and attitudes during the US occupation of Haiti from 1915-1940, "voodoo," "primitive," and "African" became interchangeable descriptors.⁴⁴⁵

***Run, Little Chillun's* Audiences and the Exercise of "Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us"**

Although *Run, Little Chillun* played to a mixed audience at the Lyric and to mostly black audiences at the Lafayette Theater, a few black theater critics asserted that Hall Johnson's desire to create a more realistic portrayal of the religious lives of African Americans was directed at a white audience—much like the Hall Johnson Choir concerts.⁴⁴⁶ Chappy Gardner wrote "...when

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010), 155.

⁴⁴⁶ "Hall Johnson Show to Open: Fredi Washington Star in 'Run, Little Chillun!'" at the Lyric, *The New York Amsterdam News*, Feb. 22, 1933, 8. States that on March 1st, the NAACP receives percentage of sale of 300

audiences, mostly white, rave over a Race show, there must be something about it other than ‘just a show.’ Just what that something is, we believe, we have discovered. Last half of first scene [he means Act] reveals the? secret to *Run, Little Chillun’s* success.”⁴⁴⁷ This is the New Day Pilgrim scene and Gardner described it in detail, concluding, “There never has been such reality of dramatic acting packed into any one piece.” However, six months later, when the play was moved off Broadway and into the Lafayette Theater in Harlem where it played to a mostly black audience, he says:

Probably the most dismal failure of any Negro production since Donald Heywood’s “Old Man Satan” was that of Hall Johnson’s *Run, Little Chillun* which opened at the Lafayette last Monday. Financially the show was a flop. Reasons given were the nearness to Christmas and the fact that Negroes see too much of Hall’s kind of a show in their churches.”⁴⁴⁸

Similarly, an anonymous reviewer of the *New York Amsterdam News* asserted that the realistic portrayal of the hypocrisy of the church was tragic to some, “with a pessimistic leaning as to the future of the race.” Others, however, found it to be humorous. But to the majority of the audience

tickets to the March 2nd performance. Friends of the association were able to buy tickets. Because of this (and the fact that black journalists reviewed the show), we know that at least one performance at the Lyric was mixed, or either played to an all-black audience. Performances at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem played to mostly black audience. See Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 204-206. Hill and Hatch provide a brief history of the historic Lafayette Theater. It was desegregated in 1912, and housed an all-black company entirely managed by whites (ownership of the theatre, management of company, direction of productions, and stage settings were all done by whites). For the most part, the Lafayette players performed classic and contemporary plays by white playwrights with the exception of a few works by black playwrights. By the 1930s, the theater had a tradition of performing “tabs” (abridged versions of Broadway shows) and sometimes used actual sets and costumes from original productions. Hill and Hatch explain that the majority of the audience was black, but they welcomed white audiences (205). When the Federal Theatre project was established in 1935, New York State governor Alfred E. Smith said “As you know, it is the desire of the Federal Theatre Project to establish the Negro unit in the Lafayette Theatre in New York as a Negro theatre for Negroes, rather than as a Harlem attraction for downtown whites” (See Miller, 113).

⁴⁴⁷ Chappy Gardner, “‘Run, Little Chillun,’ Decides Not to Close,” *Chicago Defender*, June 17, 1933.

⁴⁴⁸ Chappy Gardner, “Too Much Like Church, Harlem Snubs ‘Chillun,’” *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 30, 1933.

at the Lafayette, it was not entertaining.⁴⁴⁹ He stated, “Mr. Johnson, most likely having in mind his white audiences, did bring us a cut and dried scene from darkest Africa when the boys and girls cut loose.”⁴⁵⁰

Like Chappy Gardner, William Kelley, editor of the *New York Amsterdam News*, explained that the play was realistic for the Southern “born-and-bred Negro who knows or who once knew his religion.” However, he also believed that Johnson’s play was possibly not “written for his [Southerners] amusement or edification.”⁴⁵¹ In these statements he both affirmed the assumed authenticity of the church scenes in the play and also speculated that Johnson wrote the play for white audiences. Kelley urged blacks to see *Run, Little Chillun* because it “makes it possible for them to see themselves in an objective manner, and if there is any one thing Negroes need to do it is to see themselves as others see them—in the church at school, at work, or at play.” Kelley’s article, published in the weekly editor’s column “Timely and Untimely Topics” was titled “Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us,” a quote that echoes a famous passage in W.E.B Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* where he describes African Americans’ “double consciousness,”

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁹ “Little Ones Not Running: At Least Not Fast Enough to See Hall Johnson’s “Run, Little Chillun,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1933.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ William M. Kelley, “Timely and Untimely Topics: Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 22, 1. “Timely and Untimely Topics” was a regular column by William M. Kelley editor of the *Amsterdam News*.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

Kelley claimed that Double Consciousness—the sensation of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of those who are predisposed to see through a lens of racial prejudice—is what Johnson exercised when creating *Run, Little Chillun*. Kelley believed that Johnson was portraying Negro folk culture from “beyond the veil” (through the lens of white people) by adding elements that were considered to be authentic to Negro folk culture. However, this authenticity was superficial as it was meant for those outside the veil. Kelley, who was a highly educated African American, Fredi Washington, Alston Burleigh (Harry T. Burleigh’s son), and Johnson himself, did not have any lived experiences similar to those of the characters in *Run, Little Chillun*—this folk culture was not exactly their own.⁴⁵³

At the essence of double consciousness is that black people (those “behind the veil”) know they are not who other people perceive them to be. The special ability of these black artists to understand the minds of the people “beyond the veil,” and then act according to how they think black people behave, is in many ways the same motivation behind Locke’s exhortation for black artists to embrace Negro folk culture and vaguely defined Africanisms. As Fraden notes, “A double consciousness – in which the truer self hides behind the veil, learns to deliver what the audience of masters expects (entertainment and laughs) and at the same time treats the players and the audience to another text and other purposes – becomes the defining feature of African American cultural history.”⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ For Fredi Washington’s biography see Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) 108-110. For Alston Burleigh see Craig Von Buseck *Nobody Knows: the Forgotten Story of One of The Most Influential Figures in American Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 197.

⁴⁵⁴ Fraden, 55.

Conclusion

Johnson's drama stood apart from at least two other works by black playwrights with similar plots. Al Monroe, journalist for the *Chicago Defender* compared *Run, Little Chillun* to J. Augustus Smith's folk play *Louisiana* (1933) which portrayed the struggle between a voodoo cult and an African American Christian church and featured rousing performances of Negro spirituals in a revival scene. Monroe claims that *Louisiana* flopped because it burlesqued, or made a caricature of, the South and "Race folks", whereas *Run, Little Chillun* did not because, "it was realistic, dare I say authentic—it did not burlesque."⁴⁵⁵ Without any further explanation for his conclusion, Monroe then introduces a new play titled *De Function* by African American composer Edward H Boatner who wrote several arrangements of Negro spirituals. *De Function* was about a choir leader at Pilgrim Baptist Church in the South during the 1890s. Monroe claims that like Marc Connelly and Hall Johnson, Boatner depicted Negro folk culture in a manner that was respectful and authentic, "without inviting criticism from those who see burlesque in everything done on a religiously flavored scale."⁴⁵⁶

For Hall Johnson, the scenes discussed in this chapter were more than depictions of primitivism intended to capture the imagination of his white audience. *Run, Little Chillun* was a product of the New Negro ideals of the Harlem Renaissance that drew upon primitivism as a source of pride and as a way to command the attention of white audiences. Capitalizing on the perceived primitivism of black Americans' African heritage, Hall Johnson aspired to create a work that portrayed Negro folk culture in the ways that elite African Americans such as W.E.B. Du Bois had been defining it: as both African and American. Their carefully constructed definition of Negro

⁴⁵⁵ "Singing on Stage" Box Office Sadly in Need of Ideas, Say Theater Critics," *Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1933.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

folk culture was not always historically accurate or authentic, and much of their history of African culture was imagined, yet they told the same story of the hybridity of African American culture and its significant role in the larger American culture.

Chapter 3

A People's Drama:

The Federal Theater Project Production of *Run, Little Chillun*

Sulamai dies dramatically after being struck by lightning in the final scene of *Run, Little Chillun*, prompting Hall Johnson to write in the 1933 script: “Who is revenged, Jehova or Elder Tongola?” In so doing, Johnson suggests that the audience is left with this unresolved question.⁴⁵⁷ However, in 1938 when the drama was performed under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project in Los Angeles, Johnson made it clear that it was Elder Tongola (*not* the Christian God) who murdered Sulamai; in the synopsis included in the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) program bulletin, the final sentence reads, “Tongola has had his revenge.”⁴⁵⁸ Additionally, Johnson wrote a theology of the New Day Pilgrims that was included in all FTP programs in 1938 - 1939. In it, he includes a description of the appearance and history of the Pilgrims and reinforces one of the main points of Brother Moses’s sermon: that the New Day Pilgrim’s religion is for the transformation of *black* people’s minds.

What prompted these revisions and additions? In this chapter, I explore possible answers to this question. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Johnson’s fictional New Day Pilgrim cult and their doctrine can be understood as a criticism of Christianity and colonialism clothed in New Negro ideals. The various religious inspirations and Afrofuturistic ideology that characterized the New Day Pilgrims contributed to the overall message of black empowerment. Yet, *Run, Little Chillun* appealed

⁴⁵⁷ Hall Johnson, “Run, Little Chillun,” in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*, ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 273-279.

⁴⁵⁸ “Synopsis,” *Production Bulletin for Run, Little Chillun*, (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1938), container number 1068, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 2.

to both black and white audiences. Unlike many more radical FTP plays, *Run, Little Chillun* did not deal explicitly with racism or classism, and it only indirectly challenged black Christian religious practices. This may account for its broad appeal. As one critic of the FTP production explained,

Like the all-too-few other ‘human’ dramas of the last decade, this production has a warmth that touches the heart of everyone, regardless of race or color. It appeals both to the primitive instincts and emotions as well as to the cultured an esthetic mind—and both usually are to be found in the same personality.⁴⁵⁹

Theater historian Rena Fraden claims that the universal appeal of Johnson’s drama was because it was “decidedly *not* propaganda,” which is precisely what made it appealing to the conservative Los Angeles (FTP) unit in 1938.⁴⁶⁰ Fraden asserts that the Los Angeles unit was one of the least politically controversial of the FTP Negro units in the country, and it was governed by a powerful white bureaucracy.⁴⁶¹ Fraden’s chapter on the FTP production of *Run, Little Chillun* further explains that white directors chose which plays would be produced by the Negro unit, and plays that were not propaganda were more often selected.⁴⁶² She also points out that plays selected prior to *Run, Little Chillun* were directed by whites, and were performed by the black actors in the Negro unit.⁴⁶³ She claims that none of these plays were politically radical and that they were all period

⁴⁵⁹ James Warnack, “‘Run Little Chillun,’” *LA Times*, May 19, 1939. From a column titled “By the Church Editor.”

⁴⁶⁰ Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 179. The board members are not identified in Fraden’s work.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 178-9.

pieces.⁴⁶⁴ She details the 1938 petition of Negro unit actors who challenged the FTP to live up to their goal of producing theater of, by, and for the people.⁴⁶⁵

Fraden posits that white directors chose to produce *Run, Little Chillun* because they perceived it as an innocuous musical that made audiences of all races feel good and also met the criteria of those who petitioned for a drama written by an African American.⁴⁶⁶ Yet Johnson's aforementioned clarification in the FTP bulletin for *Run, Little Chillun* and the addition of the New Day Pilgrim theology in the programs, suggests that Johnson was aware of the climate in which his work was being performed and was making a powerful, if subtle, intervention. Johnson's performance of Negro folk culture in *Run, Little Chillun* may not have been categorized as a propaganda play—it did not tell the story of a legendary figure who endured the hardships of a racially unjust society, or directly criticize current socio-political events. However, the specific revisions to the FTP version, compared with previous iterations of the work, suggest that the play was more politically engaged than Fraden acknowledges. Furthermore, comparing the Los Angeles Negro unit productions to those of other Negro units in New York, Chicago, and Seattle reveals that not all of the theatrical works performed by the Los Angeles Negro unit prior to 1938 were completely devoid of any social critique as Fraden claims. Plays produced by the Los Angeles Negro unit like *Black Empire* by Christine Ames and Clark Painter and Orson Wells's adaptation of *Macbeth* for black actors were non-dialect plays that featured educated black men as lead characters. These aspects alone challenged negative stereotypes of blacks, and consequently, made some audiences uncomfortable, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

⁴⁶⁴ Fraden, 179.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 180-181.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 178-186.

The Federal Theatre Project: Plays “of, by, and for the American People”

An article titled “Wanted: Good Plays about Americans” in *The Prompter*, a publication of the Federal Theatre Project, challenged up and coming American playwrights to write plays about America and their everyday experiences. It suggests:

...Propaganda for birth control, Moscow, and polygamy pops up in the Play Bureau all the time, and gets popped back to the zealous authors. The Federal Theatre needs plays about the people of the United States. The crackpots aren’t going to write them, so it’s up to those who have always intended someday to get out a playscript. This is the chance, and there are plenty of things to write about, in forty-eight states.⁴⁶⁷

The article is accompanied by an illustration of John Henry, the legendary African American hero and it includes suggestions for play subjects, including the history of various states and regions of the country. Playwrights are encouraged to follow the example of Paul Green and others who pioneered a native American theatre genre in the 1920s.

The Federal Theater Project was part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, an agency of his New Deal.⁴⁶⁸ It was an ambitious attempt to mitigate and eventually eradicate the economic effects of the Great Depression by mobilizing the nation’s unemployed citizens, providing federal employment for people via deficit spending and tax hikes.⁴⁶⁹ There were several projects initiated under the banner of the WPA, but the president and Harry Hopkins, the administrator of the WPA, held special hopes for the Federal Arts Projects (also

⁴⁶⁷ “Wanted: Good Plays About Americans,” *The Prompter*, December 1936, container number 1026, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁶⁸ Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of this music belongs to the nation: The Federal Music Project of the WPA and American cultural nationalism, 1935-1939* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), x. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established in 1935 after several unsuccessful state relief legislations and mildly successful temporary federal relief programs emphasized the need for a federally funded, comprehensive employment agency in order to bring the United States out of the economic depression.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

known as Federal Project One). They wanted the Federal Arts Projects (FAP) to provide regular media coverage for the WPA, further encouraging the national will for recovery.⁴⁷⁰ In August of 1935, FDR officially announced the creation of the FAP along with the directors in charge of the various projects: Holger Cahil for art, Hallie Flanagan for theater, Henry Alsberg for writers, and Nikolai Sokoloff for music. President Roosevelt budgeted \$27,315,217 solely to Federal Arts Projects, which functioned to employ America's artists in the hopes of boosting the nation's morale by re-invigorating, re-discovering, and re-defining American culture.⁴⁷¹ Hopkins hired Hallie Flanagan to be the director of the FTP because she was a progressive who believed in the power of the arts to combat despair and poverty.⁴⁷² Therefore, the FTP provided an unprecedented opportunity and financial motivation for American playwrights to write plays that were distinctly American.

One of the goals of the FTP was to celebrate the country's multiculturalism. It included a Spanish unit in Miami, a Yiddish unit in New York and Los Angeles, French and Italian units, as well as seventeen Negro units.⁴⁷³ Negro units were established in Boston, Hartford, Newark, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Seattle, Los Angeles, among other major cities in the United States, and they

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Fraden, 4, 27, 29- 30, 31, 34. Flanagan taught theater at Grinnell College, her alma mater, studied theater with George Pierce Baker at Harvard's 47 Workshop, and taught and directed theater at Vassar. One of the first women to be a Guggenheim Scholar, she studied theater in Europe, including Russia. Most importantly, Flanagan had no commercial ties—she was not part of the Broadway crowd, and she was an academic. Flanagan had the challenge of making “high art” theatre accessible and popular to the masses, with the goal that all people, regardless of class would have access to the theater. To reach this aim, FTP productions were as cheap as movie tickets and sometimes even free. Over 30 million people attended plays and the FTP was nicknamed the “people’s theater.” The goal of the FTP was to produce theater that was of, for, and by the people (even though this often contradicted the other goal of the FTP, which was to expose the people to “high art”).

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 3.

produced some of the most successful theater of the FTP.⁴⁷⁴ The most prolific unit was the Negro unit at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, established by the FTP in the hopes of establishing it as a theater for Negroes rather than an uptown attraction for whites.⁴⁷⁵ Continuing the vision of Du Bois and his KRIGWA theater and Alain Locke's call for young black playwrights, the FTP helped launch the careers of new black playwrights who would create art reflective of the black experience.⁴⁷⁶ Flanagan and Hopkins believed that allowing the people to represent themselves in the theater would automatically result in authentic ethnic dramas.⁴⁷⁷ During the FTP, Negro folk culture, the glorification of southern, rural folk, and Africanized primitivisms were still considered to be authentic representations of the race. Theatrical works that depicted these types of representations were generally successful. Labor agitation-propaganda dramas such as *Turpentine* and *Stevedore* met resistance from FTP officials.⁴⁷⁸ *Turpentine* was a play about black and white southern workers in turpentine camps who organized a strike against the unfair working conditions by African American playwright J. Augustus Smith who wrote *Louisiana* and *Drums O' Voodoo* (discussed in the previous chapter).⁴⁷⁹ *Stevedore* by white playwrights George Sklar and Paul Peter dramatized a black stevedore who defends himself against his white bosses, ending with black and white workers uniting to defend his rights.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁷⁸ *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, ed. John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown (Washington: New Republic Books, 1978), 20. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 206.

⁴⁷⁹ People who worked in the turpentine industry would live in settlements or camps.

There were some discrepancies with the FTP's goal to be inclusive and promote theater that represented the diverse American population. Although the FTP was progressive in its stance to not allow any unit to perform to segregated audiences, blacks were rarely in white casts and there were very few mixed casts.⁴⁸⁰ Negro units were mostly directed by whites and the success of their productions largely depended on white audiences and reviewers.⁴⁸¹ Flanagan did not want to portray miscegenation on stage and some black middle-class professionals were worried about alienating white audiences or offending black middle-class audiences. Given these fears, it was challenging to produce theater that appealed to a mixed-race audience during the 1930s.⁴⁸²

Though the FTP attempted to broaden the racial and ethnic diversity in American theater with some reservations, they also challenged the status quo with plays that were heavily influenced by left-wing politics such as *Turpentine* and *Stevedore*. In the early stages of the FTP, many organizations were coopted or required members to join the WPA projects, taking much of the talent from the leftist worker theaters such as the Theatre Union, Artef, The Theater of Action (the Workers Laboratory Theater). As a result, the FTP gained the reputation as one of the most politically engaged out of all of the WPA projects.⁴⁸³ The most popular example of this is Orson Welles's production of *The Cradle Will Rock*, a Brechtian musical that criticized corruption and greed in capitalist America and extolled the virtues of workers unions.⁴⁸⁴ There was also a strong Communist Party presence in the Federal Theater Project. The Negro People's Theater directed by

⁴⁸⁰ Fraden, 6.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010), 78.

African American actress Rose McClendon staffed a good part of the Harlem Negro unit.⁴⁸⁵

McClendon met regularly with Harlem Party leaders who encouraged her to produce plays of social protest. After she died from cancer in 1937, her white co-director, John Houseman continued this relationship.⁴⁸⁶ However, the communist influence on the FTP was not always obvious or clear-cut.⁴⁸⁷ The Harlem Negro unit's first three productions: *Walk Together Chillun*, *The Conjure Man Dies*, and Orson Welles's *Macbeth* did not appeal to the party, while *Turpentine* did appeal to the Communist Party.⁴⁸⁸

Setting the Stage for *Run, Little Chillun*: Plays produced by the Los Angeles FTP Prior to 1938

Prior to producing *Run, Little Chillun* in 1938, which was this unit's only major hit, they performed George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, André Obey's *Noah*, Christine Aime's and Clark Painter's *Black Empire*, and Frank B. Wells's *John Henry*. Rena Fraden claims that none of these plays were politically radical and that they were all period pieces.⁴⁸⁹ However, with a closer look at these productions, Fraden's claim is not accurate. Furthermore, *John Henry*, produced in 1936 by the unit was written by an African American playwright, Frank B. Wells, making *Run, Little Chillun* the second work produced by the unit authored by a black playwright. The plays produced by the Los Angeles Negro unit prior to *Run, Little Chillun*

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Naison, 206.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁸⁹ Fraden, 179.

portrayed some perceived stereotypes of blacks as primitive. However, *Black Empire* and *Macbeth* provided black actors with the opportunity of performing serious, non-dialect drama, which disproved the assumption that black actors were incapable of such an accomplishment. Like New Negro dramas such as *Run, Little Chillun*, primitivism in these works was a means of reclaiming an African heritage—not of denigrating blacks. With the exception of *Noah* and *Androcles and the Lion*, which allowed critics to assume that blacks were childlike and simple-minded, the plays performed by the Los Angeles Negro unit challenged some racial boundaries faced by blacks.

In 1936, the Negro unit in Los Angeles gave their first performance, premiering *Black Empire* written for the Federal Theatre. The play is about the Haitian dictator, Henri Christophe, and the voodoo-fueled revolt against his tyrannical reign. The drama was complete with voodoo dances and musical numbers composed by Adrian Mack, who wrote much of the music for several of the Los Angeles FTP units. The director, Claude Miller who had experience directing plays on Broadway, noted that the voodoo chants and drumming were vital to the play, and the cast studied voodoo chants and hand gestures.⁴⁹⁰

Black Empire was likely inspired by the success of Orson Welles's adaptation of *Macbeth*, popularly known as “voodoo Macbeth,” and produced by the Harlem unit.⁴⁹¹ As explained in chapter two, Haiti was viewed by some African Americans as a heroic nation of former slaves who won the battle against colonial control, and Toussaint L'Ouverture was hailed as a hero.⁴⁹² However,

⁴⁹⁰ Claude Miller, “Director’s Note,” in *Production Bulletin for Black Empire* (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1936), container number 984, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, n.p.; *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, 119.

⁴⁹¹ Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 78. Set in Haiti instead of Scotland, with three voodoo priestess instead of witches, the original idea for “voodoo Macbeth” was for it to be a metaphorical depiction of the reign and demise of Henri Christophe.

⁴⁹² Joseph McLaren, *Langston Hughes, Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 101. Prior to both of these productions, Langston Hughes wrote *Emperor of Haiti*, a play about the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessaliens, and Henri Christophe. Hughes

Black Empire and, less directly, *Macbeth*, dramatize the demise of Christophe who was a tyrant and hated by the people of Haiti. Like *Emperor Jones* (which was also inspired by Henri Christophe), the protagonist in these plays were villains—not heroes. In a semi-annual report submitted to Hallie Flanagan, Henry Miller notes that the drama “produced capable negro actors in a non-dialect play reflecting dignity upon the colored race.”⁴⁹³ It is possible that the depiction of a powerful, educated black man such as Henri Christophe was not as offensive as a contemporary character with the same attributes, such as Brother Moses in *Run, Little Chilun*, because of the historical distance and the fact that Christophe was an evil protagonist.

A year later, the Los Angeles Negro unit produced their version of *Macbeth*, set in Africa and also not in dialect. A witch doctor replaces the voodoo priestess of the Harlem unit’s production of “voodoo Macbeth” and his three sisters perform “weird and sensuous jungle incantations.”⁴⁹⁴ Because the Los Angeles unit could not get Welles’s original script, they decided to set it in Africa in the ancient civilizations of Abyssinia and Madagascar in order to avoid copyright conflicts. Max Pollock, the director, also wanted this production to stand apart from *Black Empire* and hoped that the setting in Africa would achieve this goal.⁴⁹⁵ He maintained the treatment of witchcraft and the character development of Hecate from Welles’s production, however, and they hired Tommy Anderson who worked for the New York production to be the production assistant.⁴⁹⁶ In a

began writing this play in in 1928 and completed it in 1936 after he visited Haiti in 1932. He later renamed the play *Drums of Haiti*. It also served as the basis for the libretto for William Grant Still’s *Troubled Island*.

⁴⁹³ “Comprehensive Report of Federal Theatre Projects Region No. 5 From Inception of Project Through June 30, 1936,” Works Progress Administration, Record Group 69, Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Regional Reports, 1935-1939, box 100, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC., 8.

⁴⁹⁴ “Synopsis,” *Production Bulletin for Macbeth* (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1937), container number 1035, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, 4.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

narrative, semi-monthly statistical report of the Western FTP productions submitted to Hallie Flanagan by Howard Miller, the assistant director of the FTP, the voodoo scenes in *Macbeth* were described as having “a wild and fearful authenticity, never approached in imaginative terror by any other ‘Macbeth’ production I have seen.”⁴⁹⁷ However, as Fraden explains, some critics found the actors’ attempt to project Shakespearian dialogue unsuitable for an all-black cast—a critique reminiscent of John Martin’s opinion of Brother Moses’s educated manner of speech in *Run, Little Chillun*.⁴⁹⁸

The decision for the black actors speak without dialect in *Macbeth* was a return to the same choice made for *Black Empire*. However, in 1936, in between the productions of *Black Empire* and *Macbeth*, the Negro unit performed *Noah* in dialect. This play, written by the French playwright André Obey, dramatizes the Biblical story of Noah’s Arc. It premiered in Paris in 1931. Later, it was translated into English by Arthur Wilmurt and was performed in London and on Broadway in 1935.⁴⁹⁹ Jerome Coray, the director of the FTP production claimed that the “use of the beautiful English dialect of the London script would be quite incongruous.” Instead, the actors spoke in the dialect “of the plantation Negro.”⁵⁰⁰ The director also re-conceptualized the play, turning it into a “colored man’s dream and changing it into plantation costume.”⁵⁰¹ The opening scene is a revival meeting with a sermon based on Noah and the Flood. The actor playing Noah then falls asleep and

⁴⁹⁷ Georgis S. Fink, “Narrative Report for Region No. 5, August 21, 1936,” Los Angeles County, 6, WPA Record Group 69, Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Regional Reports, 1935-1939, box 100, NARA.

⁴⁹⁸ Fraden 179-180.

⁴⁹⁹ “Story of the Play” in André Obey, *Noah*, English adaptation by Arthur Wilmurt (1934; reprint, New York: Samuel French, 1973), 3-4.

⁵⁰⁰ Jerome Coray “Director’s Note,” in *Production Bulletin for Noah* (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1936), container number 1047, FTP Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, n.p. It is unclear who re-wrote the script in this alleged Negro dialect.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

after the revival is over, the curtain rises on a new scene where Noah, in his plantation garb, is building the ark. A chorus of seventy-five Negro singers provided incidental music for the play from the orchestra pit, singing Negro spirituals. About eighteen spirituals were performed (unidentified in the program or production bulletin). The staging of this production parallels that of *The Green Pastures* with its retelling of Biblical events by an all-black cast and a chorus who sang Negro spirituals in-between each scene. Like *The Green Pastures*, all of the characters were uneducated and simple-minded and spoke with southern dialects.

That same year, the Negro unit premiered *John Henry, A Saga* written by an African American playwright, Frank B. Wells, for the Federal Theater. The play is a series of events, set in the Civil War south, made popular by the legend of John Henry, an African American steel driver who hammered steel faster than a steam-powered hammer, only to die of heart failure from the physical strain. A choir of seventy Negro singers, this time directed by the African American choral conductor Carlyle Scott, sang spirituals and Negro folk songs in-between each scene.

The play begins in a stone quarry in Mississippi where a group of men sing the “John Henry hammer song” while drilling. During their break, they speculate about the legend of John Henry and one of the workers volunteers to narrate the story as it was told to him by his slave grandmother. Each scene portrays a frustrated, angry, and violent John Henry who, despite his brutish temperament, constantly beats the odds society places against him. In the play, John Henry kills his slave overseer, flees to the North, fights for the Union army during the Civil War, and defiantly proclaims that he will not take the forty acres and a mule from the government if he does not earn it with his own bare hands. The folk hero fights a sharecropper boss for his deserved pay, flees a KKK mob, cripples his wife’s lover, is cheated in gambling, and eventually dies from racing against a steam hammer at a quarry in Virginia as part of a bet that would release him from prison. The play ends with the men at the stone quarry in Mississippi inquiring why John Henry constantly fights

against all of the forces that prevent him from being a free and successful man. The synopsis included in the FTP production bulletin actually explains it as “his persistent and heroic fight against odds and the uselessness of a ‘nigger’ trying to better himself in the world.”⁵⁰² The final words of the play, spoken by one of the crew are as follows,

“If y’all’d try stud’n’ sumpn’ side whuts on der yuther side of a deck of marked cyards... you might fin’ out it ain’ jis de nigguhs’ fight.... But de common fight o’ de po’ man, what evah his cullah. Whut de worl’ need is mo’ men lak John Henry... dat won’ let nobody turn ‘em roun’ ... dat don’ nevah give up!” (emphasis original).⁵⁰³

The moral of the play bears the mark of leftist, if not communist, ideology that tended to universalize the suffering of working class people in order to create a united front against capitalism.⁵⁰⁴ However, it also contains echoes of the individualistic message for struggling members of society to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, just as John Henry did.

Each episode—especially those after the Civil War—highlight the difficulties in obtaining true freedom that were particular to African Americans, especially African American men. Clarence Muse, director of the Los Angeles FTP production of *Run, Little Chillun* praised the play, claiming that although it was folk-lore in dialect, it was “a grand monument to the easy mind of the suffering colored folk of the past.”⁵⁰⁵

Finally, in December of 1937, the unit produced George Bernard Shaw’s 1912 play, *Androcles and the Lion*, previously produced by the Seattle Negro unit in August of that year. The unit kept the original setting of the play in “the Rome of Caesar and the Christian Martyrs.” Androcles, a frail,

⁵⁰² “Synopsis,” *Production Bulletin for John Henry* (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1937), container number 1026, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, 1-3.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Denning, 9-13.

⁵⁰⁵ Clarence Muse, “Press Notices” *Production Bulletin for Androcles and the Lion* (Los Angeles: Federal Theatre Projects Region V, Bureau of Research and Publications, 1937), container number 974, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, 29.

timid tailor, and his nagging wife are confronted by a lion at a picnic. Androcles realizes that the lion has a burr in his paw and helps him remove it. He developed a friendship with the lion, which proved useful when later, Androcles (a Christian) is thrown into the arena after he refused to worship the goddess Diana at the command of the Captain of the Roman Guard. The same lion that Androcles helped earlier in the play was in the arena and, excited to see him, waltzes with Androcles around the arena to the great surprise and pleasure of the arena audience. The audience demanded that Androcles be freed, but Caesar ruled that he should fight the gladiators first. However, the lion will not allow anyone to approach Androcles, and Caesar is compelled to release him, claiming he is a wizard.⁵⁰⁶

Max Pollock, who also directed the Negro unit's production of *Macbeth* that same year, believed that the play was perfectly suited for a Negro troupe, but he did not provide further explanation for why. However, after seeing a performance, Hallie Flanagan wrote, "amazing how it adapts itself to the primitivism of Negro voices; their apparent childlike belief saves the play from fantasy."⁵⁰⁷ They replaced the hymns suggested in Shaw's original script with popular Negro spirituals, such as "Great Gettin up Mornin" also sung in *The Green Pastures*.⁵⁰⁸ However at least one audience member complained, exclaiming, "Encourage your negro chorus to stick to simple spirituals, in preference to those 'arty' numbers."⁵⁰⁹

Although all of the works performed by the Los Angeles Negro unit prior to *Run, Little Chillun* are distanced from then contemporary social-political issues blacks in the United States faced,

⁵⁰⁶ "Synopsis," *Production Bulletin for Androcles and the Lion*, 1.

⁵⁰⁷ Hallie Flanagan, "Personal Notes, 1935-39," Nov. 2, 137, New York Public Library, quoted in Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

⁵⁰⁸ "Director's Report" *Production Bulletin for Androcles and the Lion*, 4.

⁵⁰⁹ "Audience Response," *Production Bulletin for Androcles and the Lion*, 31.

John Henry did provide a social critique. However, with *John Henry* it is difficult to draw any concrete parallels between the current situation of many black Americans and the escapades of the legendary figure. Claiming that John Henry's difficulties were problems that all poor people faced, and that struggling members of the society must never give up their pursuit for a better life, downplayed the role racial prejudice plays in the social-political problems black people face. Yet, the message of John Henry echoes that of many communists and labor unions, providing socio-political critique that bordered on the radical.

Works by Black Playwrights Overlooked by the Los Angeles FTP

In 1938, the actors in the Los Angeles Negro unit organized a meeting where they reminded the Western regional director, Howard Miller, that he had promised them a Negro unit that was managed similarly to the one in Harlem: one that was run by black artists and technicians. Jess Lee Brooks, a black actor who played leading roles in all of the Los Angeles Negro unit productions claimed it was “a matter of taxation without representation.”⁵¹⁰ He, along with other members of the Los Angeles Negro unit, also requested that the FTP provide opportunities to train members of the Negro unit for various jobs in the theatre. It was in response to their demands that the FTP chose *Run, Little Chillun* to be produced by the unit with Clarence Muse, an established black actor, as the director.⁵¹¹

When those in charge of the Los Angeles Negro unit were challenged to produce theater of and by African Americans, they overlooked several plays that dealt with contemporary issues of race

⁵¹⁰ “Federal Players Here Call Mass Demand for More Jobs,” April 22, 1938, Press Releases of Department of Information, RG69, National Archives, quoted in Fraden, 180.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

and class.⁵¹² *Run, Little Chillun* combined African primitivism (“jungle” dancing and drumming) with the Negro spirituals that had been popular in previous Los Angeles FTP productions. These elements of Negro folk culture and African primitivisms that came to define Negro culture were prevalent in the Los Angeles Negro unit productions of *Androcles and the Lion*, *Noah*, *John Henry*, *Macbeth*, and *Black Empire*. However, the Negro units in New York, Chicago, and Seattle were producing works by black playwrights that dealt directly with current issues and also drew on Negro folk culture.

Natural Man, *A Black Woman Called Moses*, *Lysistrata*, and *Big White Fog*, along with many other plays by black playwrights that were performed or published outside of the FTP, such as Langston Hughes’s *Angelo Herndon Jones*, dealt with contemporary issues faced by African Americans. These plays were not considered by the Los Angeles FTP directors as a play that would satisfy the demands of the black actors and theatre workers for theater by and about them because they were too political. In comparison to these plays, Johnson’s *Run, Little Chillun* and the other works performed by the Los Angeles Negro unit does appear conservative.

One radical black playwright the Los Angeles unit overlooked was Theodore Browne. Browne was an actor and playwright for the Seattle Negro unit who produced many new plays for the FTP.⁵¹³ His most successful play was *Natural Man, A Folk Opera*, a play about John Henry produced in 1937. Unlike *John Henry* performed the previous year by the Los Angeles Negro unit, *Natural Man* is a fantasy set to music. It begins with the iconic scene of John Henry competing against the steam-driven steel hammer. Then, flashbacks help to portray various episodes in John Henry’s life, including misadventures in a hobo camp, a dive, chain gang and a camp meeting. Unlike

⁵¹² Fraden, 179-181.

⁵¹³ Witham, 68.

the eternally angry, brutish man in *John Henry*, the legendary figure in Browne's play is described as "a man alone, out of place in the over-civilized, artificial world against which he moves—always searching for the place where he can go on with the work he loves—rock breaking." John Henry dies realizing that the machine he thought he conquered continues to drill, and that he can never defeat the machine, which is a symbol of society.⁵¹⁴ The music for *Natural Man* was a series of folk songs shared and arranged by members of the Negro chorus directed by Edward White. It also included "Cause I'm a Black Man," one of the *Negro songs of Protest* collected by Lawrence Gellert, published under the alternate title, "Cause I'm a Nigger."⁵¹⁵ The first two strophes of the song were, "You take mah labor an' steal mah time/ Give me ol' dishpan an lousy dime/ 'Cause I'm a nigger dat's why/ I grow yo' cawn, get nothing to eat/ Buil' big houses, Sleep in de street, 'Cause I'm a nigger dat's why." The final strophe proclaimed, "I feel it comin' Cap'n, Goin'see you in God-damn/ Take mah pick an' shovel, bury you in Debbil's lan'/ Cause I'm a nigger, dat's why."⁵¹⁶ The program includes a note that emphasizes the moral of the play, that John Henry was unlike lazy dreamers—he wanted only hard work and freedom. However, "the hellishness of it is that he is never free. Wherever he turns, forces rise up like ghosts and scare him away. The natural man, who was once king of the earth, has been cheated and exiled."⁵¹⁷ By emphasizing the effects of structural racism, the message in *Natural Man* is radical in comparison to *John Henry*.

⁵¹⁴ "Synopsis" *Production Bulletin for Natural Man* (Seattle: Federal Theatre Projects, Bureau of Research and Publications, n.d., container number 1035, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, 4. n.p.

⁵¹⁵ "Music," *Production Bulletin for Natural Man*, np.

⁵¹⁶ *Negro Songs of Protest*, collected by Lawrence Gellert, arranged for voice and piano by Elie Siegmeister (New York: *American Music League*, 1936), 42-43.

⁵¹⁷ Program in *Production Bulletin for Natural Man*, np.

Browne also wrote *A Black Woman Called Moses*, later renamed *Go Down Moses*, a historical play about Harriet Tubman produced by the unit in 1937. The play focuses on Tubman's role as a conductor for the Underground Railroad, portraying her as an unflinchingly brave hero who deals with the dangers of bringing slaves to the north, and also the complex problems of slave men who do not trust her leadership. In the final scene of the first act, a slave named Cumbo manages to convince others on the road to freedom that Tubman was going to desert them and that they should plan a mutiny. After a heated debate, Cumbo decides to break away from the group and escape to freedom on his own. Tubman, aggravated by Cumbo's disrespect fatally shoots Cumbo as he runs away. She turns to the other fugitive slaves and says, "Diad niggahs tell no tales."⁵¹⁸

Browne's adaptation of Aristophanes's ancient Greek play *Lysistrata* was the most controversial of his plays. In the original play, the women, led by Lysistrata put an end to the Peloponnesian War by withholding sex. Browne's *Lysistrata: An African Version* was set in Ethiopia instead of ancient Greece and critiqued the Second Italo-Ethiopian war, which many African Americans, especially those involved with Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Communist Party in Harlem, protested.⁵¹⁹ He also added Negro spirituals and folk songs such as "Ain't Gonna Study War No More." The play only received one performance before the regional director shut it down due to complaints of it being too risqué, however the cast

⁵¹⁸ Theodore R Browne, *Go Down Moses*, (1938, Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2015): http://solomon.bld2.alexanderstreet.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bld2/documentidx.pl?work_code=PL000173, 86.

⁵¹⁹ Naison, 138-40.

protested the cancellation, citing racial discrimination.⁵²⁰ *Lysistrata* was also shut down because the references to the Ethiopian war disturbed the Roosevelt administration.⁵²¹

In Chicago, *Big White Fog* written in 1937 for the FTP by Theodore Ward, also met FTP censorship. Ward's play is about a contemporary black family in Chicago. Inspired by Garvey's UNIA, the father of the family invests his life savings in the organization, only to lose it after Garvey is imprisoned and deported to Jamaica. The play boldly deals with race-relations between whites and blacks, Jews, and mulattoes as the family continues to sink into financial distress. As a result of their poverty, the daughter turns to prostitution with white men in order to earn money for the family and the son's college scholarship is denied after the college realizes he is black. Colorism and prejudice among blacks is also addressed as the mulatto mother-in-law constantly berates the father for being black. The mother tries to provide food for the family by selling the furniture for food, and is involved in a racial altercation with a Jewish man who tries to negotiate lower prices for the furniture. Keeping the peace, the son exposes the racism some blacks have towards Jews, helping them to realize that the Jewish merchant was struggling against capitalism just as they were. The play ends with the son's black and white comrades uniting to help the family resist eviction from their white landlord.⁵²²

Big White Fog closed after sixty-four performances and was criticized for delivering propaganda on behalf of communism. Langston Hughes lamented the early closing of *Big White Fog*,

⁵²⁰ Witham, 72-74.

⁵²¹ Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, "Browne, Theodore," in *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 67. Roosevelt admired Mussolini and Mussolini wrote a favorable review of Roosevelt's book *Looking Forward*. Mussolini wrote, "Reminiscent of Fascism is the principle that the state no longer leaves the economy to its own devices.... Without question, the mood accompanying this sea change resembles that of Fascism."

⁵²² Fraden, 115-135.

claiming that “It is the greatest encompassing play on negro life that has ever been written. If it isn’t liked by people, it is because they are not ready for it, not because it isn’t a great play.”⁵²³ Because of the strong anti-capitalist and pro-communist message, it is not surprising *Big White Fog* was not chosen to be performed by the Los Angeles Negro Unit.

The Los Angeles Negro Unit Production of *Run, Little Chillun*

Run, Little Chillun opened on Friday, July 22nd 1938 at the Mayan Theatre in Los Angeles and then moved to the Hollywood Playhouse in May, 1939.⁵²⁴ In Los Angeles, *Run, Little Chillun* was performed for a total of eleven months and closed less than a month before the entire Federal Theatre Project was disbanded by the government on June 30, 1939.⁵²⁵ By the end of October, 1938, *Run, Little Chillun* was the most financially successful production of all of the Los Angeles FTP units and it was the first production of the Los Angeles Negro unit to be directed by a black person.⁵²⁶ The unit took advantage of the permitted ten percent of non-relief employees to hire Hall Johnson was hired as the music director and Clarence Muse—a member of the Lafayette Players in Harlem, a Hollywood film actor and “race adviser”—as the director.⁵²⁷ The unit also hired Ruby Elzy, the

⁵²³ Introduction to *Big White Fog*, in *Black Theatre U.S. A. Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*, ed. James Vernon Hatch (New York: Free Press, 1974), 279-80, quoted in Fraden, 134.

⁵²⁴ “Run, Little Chillun is a Musical Treat,” *Variety*, July, 23 1938; “Run, Little Chillun Proves to be Rousing Theatre, Bounces audience out of Seats,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 14, 1939; *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, 21; FTP Negro actors were assembled to perform *Run, Little Chillun* at the Alcazar Theatre in July 1938 and also at the 1939 World’s Fair. This production was directed by Gordon Lange and Jester Hairston, Hall Johnson’s close friend and assistant conductor for the 1933 Broadway production.

⁵²⁵ “‘Run Little Chillun’ Goes to Hollywood in 214th Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 6 1939.

⁵²⁶ “Analysis of Paid Performances in Project Operated Theatres from January 1 Through October 31, 1938,” WPA Record Group 69, Records of the Federal Theatre Project Reports of Operations in Southern California Aug 1938- Mar. 1939 box 106, NARA. October 1938, p. 18 Fraden, 181.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 181, 183.

Juilliard-trained soprano who originated the role of Serena in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, to play the role of Ella. The Carlyle Scott Chorus, a Federal Music Project Negro choir, famous as the first Negro choir to perform the Messiah in its entirety, contributed several of the cast members.⁵²⁸ The rest of the actors and production team had been involved in previous Negro unit FTP productions.

Working for the first Los Angeles Negro unit production with a black director must have filled the entire unit with pride, which also could have inspired Johnson to promote the black-nationalist theology of the New Day Pilgrims in the programs. Johnson included the following explanation of the New Day Pilgrim's theology in all FTP playbills:

The Elder Tongola has spent a hundred and fifty years in all parts of our world teaching black people that they sorely need a new religion based upon and developed out of their own essential nature and not grafted on through contact with other peoples. He tells them that God is not a testy old superman living somewhere above the skies but that He is the All-Power, manifesting himself through nature. Man, the human being, is a part of that nature, he is supported by that power, and the realization of this truth must inevitably bring joy. Ineffable joy of life in nature, not tears of remorse and repentance, is the sign of the divine touch. Sin has no existence as fact but is only a sense of guilt inculcated by wrong education. The human body is not an object for shame or concealment but should be regarded in the same way as one thinks of the trunk and branches of a beautiful, fruitful tree. All of which does not mean that man should content himself on the plane of the lower animals. On the contrary, the very presence of laudable ambitions and right desires is proof of the owner's capability to realize them, but he can only do this by working with, not against nature. The same law that produces great trees develops great men, and there is joy, always ever-increasing joy.⁵²⁹

Another reason Johnson may have felt the need to publish the theology of the New Day Pilgrims was because he was frustrated that critics of the 1933 production did not seem to take the

⁵²⁸ Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 112.

⁵²⁹ *Playbill* for *Run, Little Chillun* at the Mayan Theatre, 1938, 21. Hall Johnson Collection.

fictional cult seriously. Many reviewers of the 1933 production left *Run, Little Chillun* believing that the Christian God won the fight for Jim's soul, and the New Day Pilgrims were just a bizarre and lascivious cult. There are several possible explanations for this including the fact that the 1933 production was managed and directed by whites who may not have interpreted Johnson's script the way he intended. This could have resulted in the actors not portraying the script accurately. Hall Johnson was the author, music director, and composer of *Run, Little Chillun*, but the 1933 show was produced by the well-established entertainment lawyer Robert Rockmore, staged and directed by Frank Merlin, with settings by Cleon Throckmorton (who also designed the sets for *Porgy* in 1927) and choreography attributed to Doris Humphrey—all white professionals established in their respective fields. It is possible that due to Merlin's direction, the more radical aspects of the New Day Pilgrim scene were obscured or even edited out, therefore causing audiences to miss Johnson's message. Finally, it is likely that audiences wanted to interpret the plot as a simplistic and conventional good versus evil story, willfully dismissing any complexities as weird, or the result of Johnson's inexperience with playwriting—we really cannot know.

Fraden provides a convincing argument that, in 1938, publicists and other board members of the Los Angeles FTP viewed *Run, Little Chillun* as the antithesis to communist-tinged protest dramas despite the addition of the New Day Pilgrim theology to the programs.⁵³⁰ According to the publicist, the music drama taught audiences an “inner message,” most likely referring to the belief that the drama was extolling the virtues of resisting temptation and remaining faithful to the wholesome Christian religion. This is an indication that, like the 1933 production, critics and reviewers (and perhaps audiences) still did not understand that it was Elder Tongola who exacted his revenge against the temptress Sulamai. As a result, these audience members were also dismissing the New

⁵³⁰ Fraden 181-183.

Day Pilgrims as merely a pagan foil for the Hope Baptists. By misunderstanding Johnson's intention for the audience to understand that Elder Tongola was the god who sought justice, audiences could easily view *Run, Little Chillun* as a morality play where there was a simple battle against good and evil, making it easy to dismiss all of Brother Moses's sermon as insignificant, if not crazy.

Critic's Responses to The New Day Pilgrims in 1938

In a mostly positive review, one critic of the FTP production seemed certain that it was definitely the Christian God who killed Sulamai with a bolt of lightning. He complained about how unrealistic it was for Sulamai to be struck by lightning, but still have time to die in a "semi-comfortable" fashion.⁵³¹ The critic also mentioned that there was some confusion as to what the bolt of lightning was, and complaints that the staging was not effective. Corroborating this criticism, an audience member complained that the thunder and lightning was not realistic, which led to some misunderstanding over what the sounds were and why Sulamai suddenly died.⁵³² This is an indication that the staging, lighting, and possibly the directing and acting, were not delivering the main point that Elder Tongola was exacting his revenge.

Attempting to understand this fictional cult and their religious practices, a black critic from the Los Angeles-based African American newspaper *California Eagle* reasoned that Johnson was "showing a touch of the primitive, mingled with the intellect of the white man's knowledge from the universities."⁵³³ Even though the New Day Pilgrim theology was strange to the reviewer, he

⁵³¹ "Rob Wagner's Script," August 6, 1938 reprinted in *Production Bulletin for Run, Little Chillun*, container number 1068, FTP Collection, Library of Congress, 35.

⁵³² Ibid., 54.

⁵³³ Ibid., 34-35.

believed that it “gives rise to a new thought.”⁵³⁴ Evidently this reviewer saw value in the theology of the New Day Pilgrims and did not dismiss it as a ridiculous foil for the Hope Baptists included in the work merely for sensational, dramatic effect. The fact that the reviewer associates the intellectual aspect of the cult as white university knowledge is indicative of a belief that an Oxford University education is an education of and for white people. This may also be why John Martin (discussed in the previous chapter) found it so inconceivable that the educated, articulate speech of Brother Moses was realistic for a black man. It is important to note, however, that this *California Eagle* review was the only one that I discovered in my research of over ten periodicals (over half of which are African American publications), where a critic actually describes the intellectual aspect of the New Day Pilgrims’ leader and theology.

Unlike John Martin’s scathing comments of the educated Brother Moses, the critic from the *California Eagle* wrote that Johnson portrayed different types of Negroes (the church-going Negro, the intelligent Negro, and the Mulatto seductress), which established his play as authentic. The reviewer wrote,

Those of us who witnessed the performances of ‘Run, Little Chillun’ saw a different Negro. Not the Nordic man’s idea of a Negro, but the Negro as he actually is. Hall Johnson has painted the most vivid portrait of a lovable carefree and ‘Amen Corner’ Negro ever presented on the American stage.

He also has the intelligent Negro who received his degree from the University of Oxford in England. Then there was Salome, called Sulamai. She was just about the most seductive and enchanting, yet at times tender and sympathet [sic], in all a most contradictory personality.⁵³⁵

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ *The California Eagle*, July 28, 1938 in *Production Bulletin for Run, Little Chillun*, 32.

The reviewer vouched for the authenticity of the revival scene by claiming that he grew up in a church similar to the one depicted in the drama; he also felt that Johnson portrayed the language of an oppressed people in *Run, Little Chillun*.⁵³⁶

More common were the reviews that fixated on what critics deemed were the “primitive,” “voodoo,” and “African” aspects of the New Day Pilgrim ceremony, which were similar to the 1933 reviews. Even the nuanced and thoughtful *California Eagle* review mentioned above described it as “an odd mixture of paganism, mysticism and voodooism... which causes one’s mind to wander to Darkest Africa.”⁵³⁷ One reviewer compared the New Day Pilgrim scene to *Aida*, claiming that the 150 person choir rivals other opera companies, explaining, “The music, written and arranged by Johnson, is more sincerely impressive than the consecration scene in ‘Aida.’” This critic also praised Joseph James who played Brother Moses as a “capital Ramsis [sic]” as well as Janet Collins, “The solo dancer who gyrated in the moonlight in that last scene of the first act, previously mentioned, would put to shame any black-skinned maiden who has ever danced in the wake of the Triumphal March in ‘Aida.’”⁵³⁸

In a 1939 interview, Johnson himself explained that he created the New Day Pilgrims for musical and dramatic contrast and that he was inspired by “a little bit of Father Divine, a little bit of something else” but that “they certainly aren’t voodoo cultists.”⁵³⁹ This is in keeping with what Johnson wrote in the original script, that “The general impression should be of something

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁵³⁸ “Run, Little Chillun is a Musical Treat,” *Variety*, July, 23 1938.

⁵³⁹ John Hobart, “‘Run, Little Chillun’ Proves to Be Rousing Theater, Bounces Audiences Out of Seats,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 14, 1939, also quoted in Judith Weisenfeld “‘The Secret at the Root’: Performing African American Religious Modernity in Hall Johnson’s *Run, Little Chillun*,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 21 (2011): 53.

approaching voodoo—not too directly African, but with a strong African flavor” and, “Since the cult is not designated by any familiar name, any feature may be introduced which serves to make the whole scene more striking without any chance of controversy or any possibility of offense to any existing religious group.”⁵⁴⁰ The cult was meant to evoke many different religious groups that were reminiscent of vodun, Africanisms, and even contemporary cult leaders; it was deliberately vague in this regard. By creating this Africanist cult, Johnson provided a stereotypical contrasting religious group for the Hope Baptists. However, this does not negate that Johnson wanted the cult to be considered as seriously as the Hope Baptists. The fictional, hodge-podge of “primitivist” religions that was the New Day Pilgrims had an equally important message as the Hope Baptists—they were worthy opponents to the Christian group.

Although *Run, Little Chillun* was the first successful attempt for the Los Angeles Negro unit to produce a drama directed, written, and acted entirely by blacks, not all board members of the FTP were in agreement with maintaining a black-run unit. The executive director of the Los Angeles Federal Theater Project who was hired just a few months before *Run, Little Chillun* closed, fired some black members of the unit and replaced them with non-California whites.⁵⁴¹ In protest, Clarence Muse resigned from the FTP, claiming that Alexander Leftwich, executive director of the Los Angeles FTP, was discriminating against members of the Negro unit and that the spirit of helping the needy was forgotten. He also charged Leftwich with saying racially insensitive comments to the cast. For example, when introducing himself, he announced that “he first saw the light of day, nursing at a black mammy’s breast.”⁵⁴² Muse claimed that Leftwich expected black people were

⁵⁴⁰ Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 251.

⁵⁴¹ “‘Private Backing’ Takes Over FTP Hit; Jim Crow Charged,” *California Eagle*, June 15, 1939.

⁵⁴² Ibid., “Group is Organized by Five Outs as WPA Supervisors,” *The Evening Tribune*, June 15, 1939.

made to bow and scrape to him.⁵⁴³ The racial climate of the Los Angeles FTP was not as conducive to a thriving Negro unit that upheld the FTP's goals of producing plays "of, by, and for the American People" as the Seattle or Harlem Negro units.

Conclusion

We can never know why Johnson included a detailed description of the New Day Pilgrim's theology and an explanation of Sulamai's death at the hands of Elder Tongola for the FTP production. It could be because the all-black production team and cast created a sense of empowerment and boldness to present the New Day Pilgrims as more than a religious foil for the Hope Baptists. Regardless of the reason, *Run, Little Chillun* was a product of the New Negro Renaissance. It combined the art and propaganda of the tenuous art versus propaganda dichotomy—employing primitivisms and Africanisms while also portraying an educated black man who espoused a theology that critiqued the black church. Yet one can make the argument that Johnson's drama may not have fallen under the category of "propaganda" or, in Locke's term, "problem" theatre because of Johnson's New Negro use of primitivism. On the other hand, one can explain in Du Boisian fashion, that all art is propaganda, and that Brother Moses and the New Day Pilgrims were promoting a radical, if veiled, message of black self-reliance.

Based on the reviews discussed in this chapter, it seems as if primitivism and the popular voodoo/African jungle trope makes it impossible for audiences to view *Run, Little Chillun* as anything but a feel-good drama about good (Christianity) versus evil (an "Africanized pagan cult").

⁵⁴³ These events created a perfect situation for Willis Lusher, the owner of a private production syndicate (and former technical director of the FTP), to convince Johnson to lease the rights of the music drama to him. For this exchange, Johnson was promised to receive Dramatist Guild royalties (a percentage of the gross earnings). Lusher also conducted a theater "raid" and poached 60 of the cast principals. He hired some of the Hall Johnson Choir singers and opened the show in San Diego in June.

All of the veiled propaganda in *Run, Little Chillun* and in other dramas produced by the Los Angeles Negro unit, appear to be negated by the “voodoo dance” scenes and the emotional Christian revivals that were the earmark of many successful black dramas, according to some critics. As a result, the addition of the New Day Pilgrim theology and the explanation of Sulamai’s death at the hands of Elder Tongola did not seem to make any difference in the general reception of Johnson’s work.

Fraden’s claim that the LA FTP unit was run by a conservative white bureaucracy was correct, especially when compared to other Negro units in different states, such as the Negro unit in Seattle. What she did not include was that *Run, Little Chillun* paved the way for the FTP to consider other Negro works like Theodore Browne’s *A Black Woman Called Moses*.⁵⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the FTP shut down in 1939, during the first week of August, a few months after *Run, Little Chillun* closed.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁴ “Two More to Follow ‘Run Little Chillun’ If Show Ever Closes,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 7, 1939.

⁵⁴⁵ After a year-long investigation conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), it was charged with fostering Communism, and with not upholding its purpose to provide relief assistance to unemployed theatrical workers.

Epilogue

Hall Johnson was a complicated figure who is one of the many African American composers who has been largely absent from scholarship in musicology. There is so much more to learn about Johnson, and in the near future, there will be ample opportunity to study more of his work when the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History and Culture make the entire Hall Johnson collection available to scholars.⁵⁴⁶ Hall Johnson's Folk Opera, *Fi-yeer*, which was never performed, would provide further insight on how Johnson applied his critiques of Gershwin's opera to his own work. Examining *Fi-yeer* in light of the requisites for writing a Negro opera, which Johnson had outlined in his essay on Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, would further reveal what was different between the two composers' approaches to representing Negro Folk culture.

Because of the information Eugene Simpson, Johnson's biographer and former owner of the Hall Johnson Collection, provides, we know that Johnson began composing his opera *Fi-yeer* when in California for the production of *Run-Little Chillun*. Unlike *Run, Little Chillun*, in which the music for the Hope Baptist revival scene mostly consisted of Johnson's arrangements of Negro spirituals, he composed all of the music for his opera. *Fi-yeer* included arias, duets, ensembles and choruses. The plot highlights events in the lives of two generations of African Americans on a southern plantation and revolves around a Voodoo woman whose music has hypnotic powers. Like *Run, Little Chillun*, Johnson wrote a script that enabled him to showcase a range of African American musical styles. *Fi-yeer* includes ballads and choruses that were in the style of Negro spirituals and instrumental dance numbers that resembled contemporary dance music of the day. In a newspaper article titled "Hall

⁵⁴⁶ Eugene Simpson has donated the Hall Johnson Collection to the museum.

Johnson Works on New Negro Folk Opera,” the author writes that Johnson “integrates the drama, melody, and vocal effects to make a musical statement about his people.”⁵⁴⁷

An interesting contrast to the Los Angeles production of *Run, Little Chillun* is the Hall Johnson Choir’s performance of the song “Scottsboro” at the Lewishon Stadium in New York City in 1938 on a concert shared by the Philharmonic Orchestra. Hall Johnson made the trip to the East Coast while mid-production with *Run, Little Chillun* to conduct the event. Similar to the many hybrid performances of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” art that took place during the mid-1930s, the Hall Johnson Choir performed work songs, Negro spirituals, and “Scottsboro” from the *Negro Songs of Protest* in a program that also featured the Philharmonic Orchestra of New York playing short orchestral works almost entirely by Russian composers. “Scottsboro” was collected by the Communist Lawrence Gellert (who lived in New York City before embarking on his folksong collecting journey), and arranged by Elie Siegmeister, who was also a Communist. It was first published in 1933 in the leftist magazine *New Masses* in a recurring section titled “Negro Songs of Protest.”⁵⁴⁸ “Scottsboro” was later published in 1936 in a collection of songs assembled by Lawrence Gellert, arranged by Elie Siegmeister titled *Negro Songs of Protest*.⁵⁴⁹ The lyrics of “Scottsboro” boldly protest the injustice of the trial. Performing “Scottsboro” indicates that Johnson sought to portray a broad spectrum of Negro culture that dealt with the Negro’s struggle. One performance led a reviewer to exclaim, “They made articulate in songs the protest rising in the bosoms of the Negro of today. They painted the problems, the sorrows of the 1938 Negro as did the spirituals in slavery.”⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁷ Eugene Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 192-195.

⁵⁴⁸ Bruce Conforth, *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 123-126.

⁵⁴⁹ *Negro Songs of Protest*, collected by Lawrence Gellert, arranged by Elie Siegmeister (New York: American Music League, 1936).

⁵⁵⁰ “Hall Johnson Choir Praised,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 7, 1938.

Further research on Johnson's political affiliations and ideologies in the mid-late 1930s would provide a more well-rounded understanding of this complex composer.

This dissertation began with an epigraph from Hall Johnson's essay on *Porgy and Bess: A Folk Opera*, which revealed Johnson's views on authorship, authenticity, and the importance of Negro folk culture to American national culture. Johnson criticized Gershwin's ability to understand and accurately portray Negro culture, claiming that Gershwin did not have the necessary knowledge to accomplish this task. He stated,

Perhaps it is Mr. Gershwin's fault if he has not written a good opera, but he can hardly be blamed if he has not quite satisfied our notion of what a good Negro opera should be. This would require more time and application than any composer not a specialist in this line could be expected to put into it. The informing spirit of Negro music is not to be caught and understood merely by listening to the tunes and Mr. Gershwin's much-publicized visits to Charleston for local color do not amount even to a matriculation in the preparatory-school that he needed for his work. Nothing can be more misleading, especially to an alien musician, than a few visits to Negro revivals and funerals.⁵⁵¹

Although Johnson conceded that Gershwin had a better understanding of Negroes than European composers who wrote works based on Negro idioms, Johnson believed that Gershwin did not profit from his knowledge or experience (because that knowledge was liminal) and instead produced an opera that was merely a gathering of a "handful of leaves."⁵⁵² Consequently, Johnson argued, "when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root."⁵⁵³

⁵⁵¹ Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess: An American Folk Opera," *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* 14 (1936): 25.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 28.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

Johnson believed that the next step toward establishing a Negro folk opera was “the insistence upon *authenticity of style*” (emphasis Johnson’s).⁵⁵⁴ He asserted that “the next step will be achieved only when the public has been made to see and like Negro material presented as its creators understand and feel it.”⁵⁵⁵ Johnson’s career as a choral director and composer was dedicated to portraying this “authenticity of style.” However, Johnson’s first-hand experience with Negro folk also provided him with limited exposure to this culture—even though he identified as Negro. Johnson’s “authenticity narrative” included highly publicized moments spent with his former slave grandmother who would sing spirituals to him. However, these experiences, though very personal to Johnson, were used as evidence of his understanding of “the secret at the root.” Yet it is not the most convincing argument for Johnson’s first-hand experience with Negro folk culture, especially because he emphasized the communal aspect of Negro folk culture and proclaimed that choral settings of Negro spirituals were the most authentic manner for the songs to be performed. Johnson’s middle-class upbringing did not provide him ample opportunities to observe charismatic revivals in southern black churches where shouting and lining-out were commonplace as in the Hope Baptist revival in *Run, Little Chillun*. Furthermore, his family was well-educated and respected in the community, and Johnson’s occupation as an orchestral violinist and violist in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance exposed him to more Broadway shows than to church revivals.

However, Johnson and his choir had a more intimate understanding of American racial oppression than Gershwin, DuBose Heyward, or any of the white playwrights mentioned in this study. Gershwin was able to author Negro-inspired works relatively free from the racial oppression

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, 28.

that Johnson claimed gave birth to Negro folk culture.⁵⁵⁶ Creating works that portrayed Negro folk had a more personal and urgent significance to black authors—especially during the timeframe covered in this dissertation, when the economic and racial oppression of the Great Depression significantly affected all blacks.

Negro folk as depicted in plays, movies, novels, and operas by both black and white authors did not reflect the vastly varied lifestyles and experiences of African Americans. The image of the Negro folk was a product of imagined romantic nationalism conflated with primitivisms, vague Africanisms, and stereotypes of African American Southerners. However, from the first public performance of Negro spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Negro folk culture became a source of pride for New Negroes. It proved that African Americans had a cultural past that was valuable, further affirming that they were a race of artists and thinkers—creators of culture who were fully deserving of civil rights.

Johnson explained that black people were never afforded the opportunity to assimilate, and therefore, Negro folk culture could never be like the culture of immigrants.⁵⁵⁷ Rather, because Negro folk culture was created by necessity as a result of slavery and systematic oppression, it could not be integrated into a theatrical melting pot. Johnson claimed that stage directors who are bereft of a true understanding of Negro folk culture who create a theatrical work based on this culture have to whitewash it in order to make it seem assimilated. Interestingly, he explains that Negro folk culture is like a “common chemical used daily for humble purposes.” A scientist (in this case Gershwin and his creative team) announces that this chemical (Negro folk culture) is a “sure cure for a certain baffling disease.”⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.

Throughout his review, Johnson also placed great emphasis on the importance of utilizing an “authentic Negro musical language” to create a true Negro folk opera.⁵⁵⁹ He claimed that although Gershwin succeeded at capturing a Negro feeling at a few points in the opera, this was not enough to make it a Negro opera. Johnson believed that *Porgy and Bess* was Gershwin’s idea of what a Negro opera should be based on cursory knowledge of black culture. This resulted in a work that, according to Johnson, lacked substantial Negro feeling or flavor.⁵⁶⁰

Johnson strove to maintain a Negro spirit in Hall Johnson Choir performances as well as his music drama, *Run, Little Chillun*. For the most part, critics, both black and white, found his portrayal authentic. But exactly how this “Negro flavor” was maintained throughout performances and works is vague. Recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir reveal a marked difference in style than that of the Fisk Jubilee Singers—the former’s performance style was less formal than the latter. Dialect was used, harmonies were fuller, and dynamics and tempo effectively portrayed the lyrics in Hall Johnson Choir recordings, setting them apart from the Fisk Jubilee Singers. However, the difference between what Johnson considered “authentic Negro musical language” that expressed the Negro spirit, and what are merely Johnson’s artistic choices, is difficult to distinguish. In *Run, Little Chillun*, Johnson portrayed the communal aspect of Negro folk music traditions he believed was an important aspect of the culture as both the Broadway and Federal Theatre Project productions of *Run, Little Chillun* employed enormous casts. Yet, as Hurston claimed, these performances had very

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 25. He explains, “while we agree that a composition in a definite racial vein must not necessarily reek in every single measure with that particular style, still, we feel that, in a work of the proportions of *Porgy and Bess*, there should be more than just an occasional flavor.”

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 25-26. Also, Johnson criticized musical elements of Gershwin’s operatic style like many other music critics did (recitative, more systematic development in orchestral interludes, etc...) He believed that Gershwin can only be expected to write a good opera about Negroes—and he failed at this because he did not capture the Negro flavor completely. Nor did Gershwin capture the simplicity of Negro music when a large group sing together or the recitative that resembled free verse-lines of Negro spirituals. He also did not accurately interpret the religious thoughts of the more debased Sportin Life.

little resemblance to the style in which Negro spirituals and other folk songs were sung in their original setting.⁵⁶¹ The closest recordings we have to what Hurston described as the “true Negro spiritual” are those of the Georgia Sea Island Singers recorded by Alan Lomax in 1959, because their style was believed to best resemble what was sung during slavery.⁵⁶² When compared with the Hall Johnson Choir recordings, the Georgia Sea Island Singers performed in a style that valued a distinctive intonation, improvisations, and “imbalanced harmonies” Hurston described as audible.⁵⁶³

Because *Run, Little Chillun* was a Negro folk drama that managed to include an educated character who bore a message critiquing Christianity as practiced in some black churches, it subtly bridged the art versus propaganda debate prominent in the 1920s and 1930s. *Run, Little Chillun* also employed primitivisms in the form of vague Africanisms in keeping with New Negro ideals—establishing Johnson’s drama as a modern cultural work. When it was performed by the Los Angeles FTP Negro Unit, it may not have challenged audiences to face racial and political issues similar to Theodore Ward’s *Big White Fog*, but Johnson strengthened his message of the Afrofuturistic New Day Pilgrim cult and their credo of black empowerment for this production.

We can only speculate about Johnson’s motives for his choices to add a theology of the New Day Pilgrims to the playbills for the Los Angeles FTP Negro Unit’s production. In general, understanding Johnson’s reasons for his artistic choices is an exercise in conjecture. Although reading motives into composers’ works is frowned upon in the musicology discipline, Johnson’s identity is inextricably linked to our interpretation of his work because, as Johnson himself insisted,

⁵⁶¹ Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” in *Negro: An Anthology* ed. Nancy Cunard (Ungar Publishing Co., 1970 orig. published 1934), 224.

⁵⁶² Alan Lomax, Liner Notes, *Georgia Sea Island Songs* New World Records 80278, 1960; digitized 1994, compact disc, p 2.

⁵⁶³ Hurston, “The Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Negro: An Anthology*, 31, quoted in Gilroy, 92.

the ethnic and racial identity of the author/composer of a work about Negroes mattered. He claimed to be an insider, and he was in certain respects, but he could not identify as the Negro folk he portrayed. Johnson was not writing plays about college-educated, conservatory-trained African American southerner who moved to Harlem at the height of the New Negro Renaissance. He wrote about the Negro folk; his choir sang Negro folk songs and were advertised with symbols of primitivism and modernism. These were deliberate choices made by a complex African American Harlem Renaissance intellectual, playwright, musician, and composer.

Appendix

Johnson provides a list of musical characteristics the slaves brought with them from Africa as well as a list of musical characteristics they discovered in the New World. These lists reveal what Johnson described as the “racial tendencies” or the racial essentialisms he believed were crucial to his constructed origin story of the spirituals (Caps emphasis are Johnson’s).⁵⁶⁴

- 1- “Fine, natural VOICES, developed by centuries of habitual singing”
- 2- “An unerring sense of DRAMATIC VALUES—in words and music—due to the wide variety of their functional songs.”
- 3- IMPROVISATION AND EMBELLISHMENT
- 4- RHYTHM

In the new world they discovered:

- 1- “A more serviceable MUSICAL SCALE—with longer range but smaller intervals.”
- 2- “A wider view of musical structure by the use of the METRICAL PHRASE.”
- 3- HARMONY and COUNTERPOINT
- 4- GOOD PART-SINGING

⁵⁶⁴ Hall Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 271.

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